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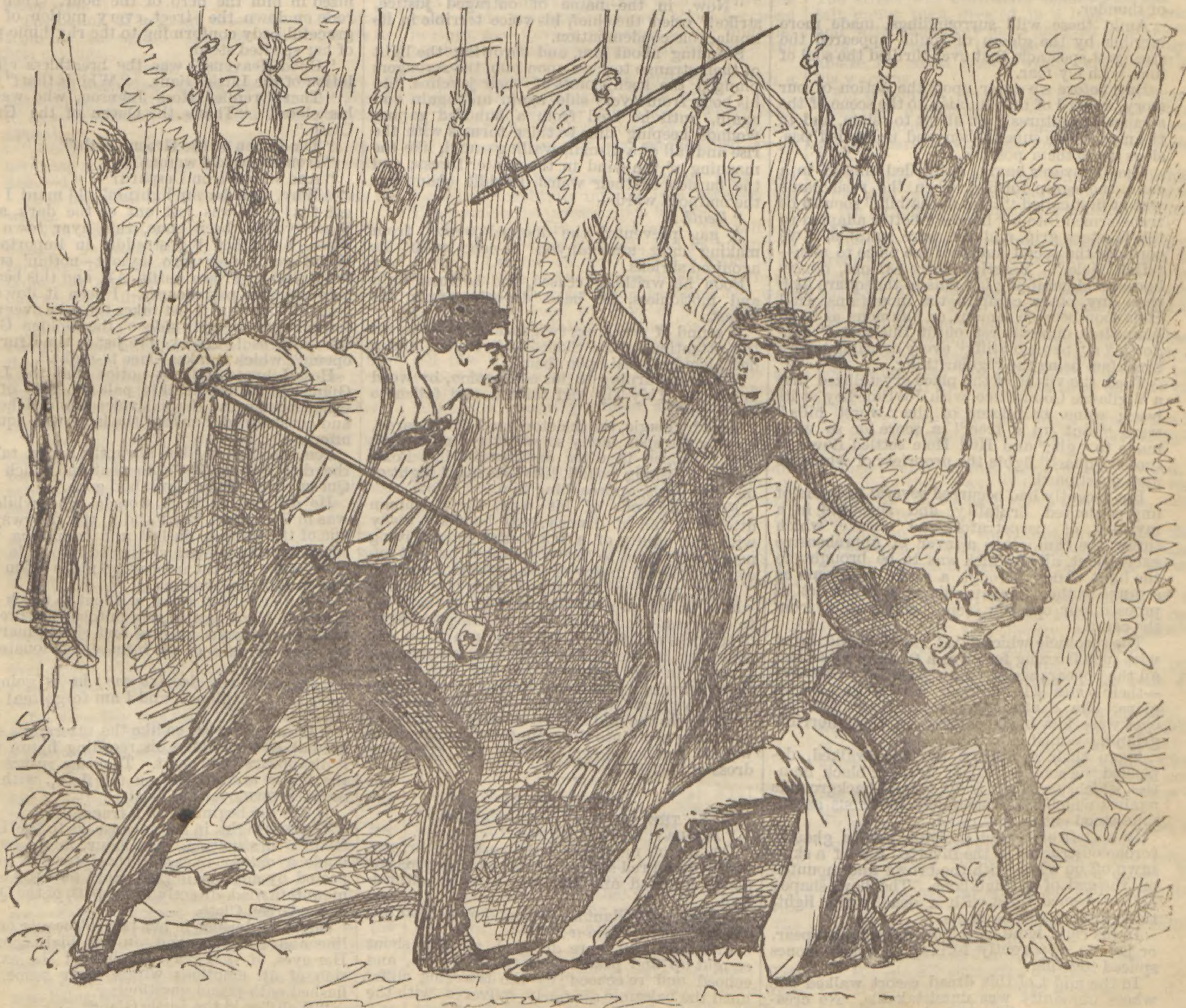
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No. 219.

Despard, the Duelist; or, The Mountain Vampires.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "PATENT-LEATHER JOE," "CAPTAIN ARIZONA," "CAPTAIN MASK, THE LADY ROAD-AGENT," "ALWAYS ON HAND," ETC.



IRON DESPARD TOWERED ABOVE HIM LIKE AN AVENGING FATE. *** BUT AT THAT MOMENT THERE CAME A SMOTHERED, MURMURING CRY.

Despard, the Duelist;

OR,

The Mountain Vampires.

A Sequel to "Captain Mask, the Lady Road-Agent."

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF "PATENT LEATHER JOE," "CAPTAIN ARIZONA," "CAPTAIN MASK, THE LADY ROAD-AGENT," "ALWAYS ON HAND," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SKELETON AVENGERS.

"MUSHA! musha! The saints betune us and hairrum! Faith, it's the devil's own band, just!"

"Cheese it, cully!—you're off your base!"

But the speaker's voice was husky and tremulous, though he affected to scorn the other's fears.

They were—Foxy, a little Irishman with fiery red hair and beard and a particolored complexion, the purple of whisky-bibbing dividing the field with great yellow freckles; and Tidy Tip, an Englishman, who owed his *sobriquet* to the neatness, not of his person, but of his pugilism.

Cowering behind a boulder, Foxy hid his face in his hat, while Tidy Tip stared over the top of the rock with eyes that momentarily grew wider and wilder with superstitious dread.

Around was a wild chaos of crags and chasms, detached boulders, lightning-riven tree-trunks, tangled brushwood, vines and creepers—a wrecked world beneath, and overhead a lowering sky reverberating with wrathful mutterings of thunder.

Amid these wild surroundings, made more terrible by the gloom of night, appeared the strangest spectacle that ever thrilled the soul of man with icy fear.

But, before we enter upon the action of our story, a word of introduction to the scene of the strange adventures I am about to relate, and to the men whose superstition and unbridled passions made them possible.

The discoverer having domiciled himself in a cave, the camp formed when the rush came was at first called "Hole-in-the-hill," soon to be transformed into a "handle" better adapted to the Western grip, and far more suitable, if we consider the social status of the place to wit:—"Hell Hole." Boasting more saloons, dance-houses and gambling lay-outs to the square inch than any other camp in the mountains, Hell Hole soon became famous, or infamous, as "the blamedest, onhealthiest outfit this side o' sun-down," a "batch o' stiffs" every morning before breakfast being the regular thing.

Then the virtue of the place crystallized into a Vigilance Committee, with Joe Smedley at its head; some half-dozen of the "worst pills" were "sent up a tree;" a score or so were made to "git;" and Hell Hole settled down to those "suar" fights the propriety of which no man questioned.

But recently had occurred several murders of unprecedented brutality, and shrouded in a mystery of perpetrator and motive, which threw the camp into a fever of apprehensive excitement, all of which was to be brought to the light of day through a series of events as strange as they were startling—to which let us proceed, our opening scene being a mile from the camp.

The spectacle which filled Tidy Tip and Foxy with such freezing fear was a troop of what had all the appearance of being *fleshless skeletons*!—their bones self-luminous, with a dull, white glare, like death-lights, while their sightless eyes were but black caverns in their horrible grinning skulls!

From their shoulders, as they walked, depended the somber folds of trailing black mantles, which, parting in front, formed backgrounds against which their strangely luminous anatomies stood out in bold relief.

In his left hand each skeleton bore a ghastly torch constructed of the inverted top of a skull sawn off on a line with the brows and mounted on the end of a thigh-bone. The bowl-shaped hollow seemed filled with a dead white light, though there was no flame.

In his right hand each bore a luminous spear, or javelin, apparently formed of human bones spliced together.

In the midst of this dread escort walked one whose humanity was unmistakable. No creature of the air was he, but a real flesh-and-blood man, dressed in the ordinary garb of a miner.

His face, seen in the unearthly glare diffused by the bones of those about him, and by their strange flameless torches, was awful in its white horror—enough of itself to chill the stoutest heart with fear. His eyes were fixed and staring, his mouth open, disclosing his glittering teeth.

Halting, the ghostly band stood round the helpless and scarcely conscious wretch, holding their torches high above their heads and the points of their lances almost in contact with his body all round, on a line with his heart.

Then one, who seemed to be the chief, spoke in hollow tones, with that peculiar liquid sound produced by the beating of an Indian drum:

"Hear ye!—hear ye!—hear ye! Oh, SKELETON AVENGERS of crime! Shall the wicked go unwhipped of justice?"

Like the tolling of a knell came the reply, in prolonged, dismal cadences, as if it were the wind moaning in their cavernous breasts:

"No-o-o! No-o-o! No-o-o!"

"What requital is meet for the despoiler of purity, the slayer of innocence?"

"De-e-ath! De-e-ath! De-e-ath!"

"James Kane, you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting! In vengeance for a woman's blighted life and broken heart we exact the expiation of your crime! And may God have mercy on your guilty soul!"

"So-o-o mo-o-o-te it be-e-e!"

Thereupon the chief waved his strange torch to the right and to the left.

Two of the skeletons, evidently preinstructed, threw lassoes over the tops of two saplings growing on opposite sides of the road.

The trees being bent toward each other, a lasso was tied to each of the prisoner's wrists, and by the strain he was lifted clear of the ground.

"Now, in the name of outraged justice, strike!" cried the chief, his voice terrible in its implacable condemnation.

Standing about him, and throwing the light of their strange torches upon him, the Avengers plunged the keen points of their javelins into his body from every side, again and again and again, until he bled from a hundred gaping wounds, keeping time to their thrusts with the rise and fall of a dismal, wailing sound, like the moaning of the wind in the winter forest; and the burden of their weird, Druidic chant was the ominous word—

"Death!"

A gag prevented the doomed wretch from making crag and canyon re-echo with his agonized shrieks.

Soon his writhing ceased, and he hung limp and motionless, his head drooping upon his breast.

A sound of crackling twigs suddenly arrested the attention of the Skeleton Avengers, and a deathlike hush fell upon them.

Without warning to his companion, by word or sound, Tidy Tip had fainted and fallen to the ground.

As if by magic, the skeleton band disappeared, leaving the spot, lately so weirdly illuminated, now wrapped in utter darkness; while Foxy heard a rushing sound, like the rapid flight of monster birds, approaching him.

Frightened out of his wits, the Irishman uttered a yell of dismay, and bounded away with the agility of a frightened hare, giving never a thought to the companion he left unconscious at the mercy of these horrid monsters.

Down the glen he rushed, torn by briars, which, in his superstitious terror, he believed to be ghost-hands clutching at him; tumbling over rocks and fallen trees, but up and on, unconscious of the bruises; panting, staggering, groping in the darkness, but on! on! before those pursuing phantoms, until, in accordance with the ghost-lore that the devil and his imps cannot pass the middle of a stream, he plunged heels over head into the mountain "run" whose waters further down washed the glittering dross of Hell Hole.

CHAPTER II.

THE CAPTAIN OF VIGILANTES.

"HOORAY, hooray! hooray!"

Down the mountain road rushed a brown-bearded and red-shirted miner, swinging his hat above his head and cheering in wild enthusiasm.

"The Leetle Giant's a-comin', boys! Hooray! Whoo-oo-oo! Tiga-a-ah!"

Pick and pan were dropped, and the shout caught up and passed on from lip to lip, and echoed and re-echoed by the towering cliffs, until the balsamic air fairly quivered with the ringing ovation.

Then from every direction set a tide of sturdy

life toward a common center—The open space before Billy Williams's saloon.

Such running!—such leaps over rock and bush and fallen tree-trunk!—such jolly rivalry! No dainty gentlemen they; but strong-limbed, rough-and-ready sons of nature, with the soil of mother earth on their garments, the bronze of the honest sun on bared arms and breasts, and the sweat of rugged toil on their brows.

"Hooray! Hooray! Hooray! A-a-a-ah!" And, followed by a cloud of dust, a single horseman dashed into their midst, and leaped from the saddle.

Such hand-shaking!—such hearty slaps on the back—such boisterous salutations and questions, without particular significance, except as expressions of good-will! Had the object of this roistering welcome possessed the arms of a Brahman idol and the myriad tongues of rumor he would have found use for them all.

This gallant young captain of Vigilantes, the idol of the camp which he ruled with almost despotic sway, had those qualities which most find favor in the eyes of rugged mountain men—an athletic, muscular development; fair, wavy hair falling to his shoulders, after the Western fashion; finely-chiselled features, a skin as fresh, smooth, and pink-tinted as the cheeks of a girl's; and blue eyes, looking dauntless, defiant courage.

After an ovation which made up in enthusiasm what it may have lacked in other respects Joe Smedley emerged from the saloon, when the first object that met his gaze was a queen-like equestrienne arrayed in a flowing green riding-habit, wearing a broad brimmed felt hat with a long trailing green plume, and mounted on a superb milk-white filly.

A moment the eyes of the bewilderingly beautiful creature rested upon him, as she recognized in him the hero of the hour. Then she rode on down the street, every motion of her graceful body conforming to the rhythmic play of her spirited steed.

"Good Heavens!" was the breathless ejaculation of the Little Giant. "Who is that?"

"That?" replied Hoss Johnson, who was at his elbow. "That's the Queen of the Green Cloth."

"The Queen of the Green Cloth?"

"Iron Despard's woman."

"And who is Iron Despard?"

"Why, thunder an' lightning, old man! I forgot that you was jest out o' the dark ages. Since you've been gone, this hyar town has taken a mighty big straddle in importance. We've got a new faro lay-out—nothin' snide, but a slap-up Frisco outfit, A1; and this beauty is to slide the pasteboards. I seen it down at Nugget City; an' it jist takes the cake over anything I ever see this side o' the Golden Gate. It's im-mense! And you're jist in time fur the openin', which it takes place to-night."

Hoss Johnson did not notice that the Little Giant had turned deathly pale at sight of the equestrienne, and that his voice sounded hoarse and constrained, nor that the lady was equally affected.

Joe Smedley walked abruptly away, taking the direction opposite to that in which the Queen of the Green Cloth had gone.

He did not notice a woman, who, while he was in the saloon, had stood in the doorway of one of the cabins, flushed and trembling with eager expectancy, which turned into pale jealousy as she saw the impression made upon him by the fair equestrienne.

When he turned away, without so much as a glance in her direction, she clutched her breasts, with the nervous gesture and sharp, inarticulate cry of pain of an intense, passionate nature.

"He does not deceive me; he is going to meet her! A glance, and I am forgotten! Ah! Ah!"

Again those cries, so like the utterances of an animal, as she follows his receding figure until it disappears from sight. Then she rushes into the house and cowers on the floor, with her dress thrown over her head.

Is this the beginning of a tragedy?

She was right in her surmise as to the Little Giant's destination. An hour later, having made a *detour* to secure this interview unsuspected by any one in Hell Hole, he stood in the mountain road, directly in the path of the Queen of the Green Cloth.

She was glorious in her perfect beauty of outline and coloring, and in her high courage. Her eyes, of that gray which hold the expression of all emotions within their scope, flashed with proud questioning.

"Well?" said the Little Giant.

"Well?" was the unyielding retort.

"Hortense!" was his next appeal, in a voice somewhat shaken.

The woman made a proud gesture of deprecation with her head.

"My name is Mrs. Despard Dangerfield!" she said in icy tones.

The man clinched his hand, set his teeth, and breathed hard through dilated nostrils. He looked steadily into her cold, white, repellent face, while he slowly regained self-mastery.

Then, while a wistful longing struggled with the proud resentment in his eyes, he asked:—

"Who-e hand did this?"

The lady's lip curled in a smile of quiet disdain, while she said, with supercilious indifference:—

"Can you ask?"

"I *do* ask!" he replied, his voice deep with a pain he could not wholly hide.

The lady's sensitive ear caught the cadence. She flashed a searching glance into his eyes. Then a cold, steely glitter came into hers, and a sneer to her cupid's-bow lips.

"No doubt the first fault lay in my own deficiency—"

"Hortense!"

"But the wearying of stale charms, the severing of distasteful ties, the perfidious desertion—these were surely—"

"No, by the *Everlasting God!*" cried the man, as he leaped forward, his strong emotion sending a wave of crimson to his brow.

The horse shied at this sudden movement. The lady curbed the animal with a skillful touch, and merely lifted the tremulous point of her whip between herself and the man who had just cried out to her from the depths of his soul.

"You forget yourself, sir!" she said, slightly arching her delicately-penciled brows.

That rebuff checked him as effectually as a stone wall.

The pallor of a great dread drove the blood from his face again. He extended his hands to her, crying:

"Hortense, I swear to you—"

A wild fluttering sprung up in the heart of the woman; but there was no external trace of it, as she ruthlessly interrupted his impassioned appeal:

"I beg your pardon. My husband must be awaiting my return, as I am already somewhat delayed."

Then mounted to his brow the purple tide of wrath.

"You do well to remind me of your husband!" he said, through his teeth. "I had forgotten him—and the debt I owe him! But from this moment it will live in my brain in characters of fire, until I wash them out with his heart's blood!"

He stepped aside; the milk-white steed bounded past him; he turned and watched the flowing green skirt and the dancing plume, until they disappeared round a bend in the road; then he cast himself face downward on the rocky earth in an agony of commingled love, rage and despair.

When the Little Giant roused himself and rose to return to the camp it was night. Before he stirred from the spot his attention was attracted by a deep-drawn sigh, and at the same instant an icy chill passed over him.

With wildly-beating heart he whirled round, and saw the light, ethereal form of a woman standing at a little distance, gazing at him with great, sad eyes.

As he caught her eye, she smiled sweetly and beckoned to him.

The effect on the man was startling. He turned as pale as death; his jaw dropped; his eyes protruded; an icy sweat started from every pore. To him, it seemed as if his hair rose on end. He was the picture of abject terror.

Joe Smedley was fully convinced that he was gazing at a disembodied spirit; and with that apparition was associated a memory that froze his blood.

The leaden weight peculiar to a nightmare fell upon his limbs, and he felt that his will was paralyzed.

The phantom turned, and, looking over her shoulder, waved her hand for him to follow her.

Powerless to resist, he obeyed, though feeling that he was walking to his doom.

Away from the road she led him, along a rock-obstructed way, now bare, now carpeted with the decaying, needle-like foliage of the pines, until she stood on the verge of a precipice.

His heart died within him. He had heard of men being thus lured to destruction.

"At last! at last! you are avenged!" was the cry of his soul.

But just as he expected to see the siren float out in mid-air over the chasm, she stopped and raised one hand on high, while with the other she pointed down into the yawning abyss.

Then, like the sighing of the wind, came faintly to his ear, yet seeming to echo and re-echo through the hidden chambers of his soul, the words:

"Not yet! Not yet!"

The phantom vanished, and a sudden oblivion fell upon him.

The unconsciousness of the Little Giant seemed but momentary. He rose with a dull pain in his head, and shudderingly drew back from the precipice, on the verge of which he had fallen.

"It is a warning," he said, aloud—"the spirit of one woman whom my hand has destroyed come to save another."

In reply, like the sighing of the wind through the pines, came, or seemed to come, the word:

"Beware!"

Joe Smedley started as if electrified. Had he really heard it; or was it only his excited imagination?

Everything around looked commonplace—the rocks, the pines, the moonlight streaming through a break in the clouds—and yet the Little Giant hastened from the spot with a chill of dread upon him.

Returning to the camp, he entered a cabin, at the door of which he was received by a woman whose manner betrayed nothing of her keen disappointment of the afternoon. In reality thirty years of age, even he did not suppose her to be more than twenty-five. She was very slender in build, which, aided by certain devices in dress that escaped the uninitiated eye, made her appear taller than she really was. Her face was perfectly colorless, her pure, white skin being in marked contrast with her jet-black hair. This, cut short, clustered about her head in rings, and gave a piquancy to her undeniable beauty which was very "taking" with the opposite sex.

This woman received the Little Giant with a smile of gladness mingled with anxiety.

"Oh, Joe!" was her salutation, "where have you been? To think of your not coming to me for even a minute, if you were called away again."

She twined her arms about his neck and looked reproachfully into his eyes, between the kisses which she pressed upon his lips.

"There, there, Hally!" he said. "To tell you the truth, I'm tired to death, and as hungry as a wolf. Let me off, now, and I'll make it up as soon as I've had something to eat and a nap."

She noticed that far from greeting her with a love made keen by days of separation, he scarcely returned her glowing caresses. But she did not let him see the death of hope that fell like a blight upon her heart. No; she wooed him with caressing words, while he ate in abstracted silence, broken only by monosyllables, the tempting supper she placed before him.

But when he lay asleep, then the fires of her soul burst forth; then she wrung her hands, only with superhuman effort stifling the moans which might awaken him; or she clenched them in white rage, her eyes blazing, her nostrils dilating, while through her set teeth came the fierce words:

"It is to be the old story over again! Never! never! I will kill him with my own hand first!"

It was in this mood that the tortured woman drew his bowie-knife from his belt, and held it poised above his heart.

At that moment there rose out of the night a sound once heard, never to be forgotten—the voice of a great multitude stricken by abject terror. It roused the sleeper, as well it might. He saw the woman and the knife. With a cry of wonder and dismay, he sprang up and caught her wrist.

CHAPTER III.

A BIG SCARE.

"Fly from the wrath to come! Fly! Fly! FLY! The Day of Judgment is at hand! God's vengeance is about to fall upon this abomination of the mountain, as of old it fell upon the cities of the plain! Repent and be saved! Turn from your wickedness ere it be too late! Eternal damnation to him that dieth in his iniquity! Everlasting bliss to the sinner that crieth unto the Lord! Awake! awake! oh, Sodom of the West!"

"What, in God's name, is that?"

"Bah! it's that infernal crazy preacher! He's always shootin' off his mouth about some tomfoolery or other. He's never happy when he ain't rakin' over the brimstun. What's trumps?"

"No! no! Listen!"

"Listen be blowed! Ef that blarsted fool has got to knock a quiet game o' draw, jest when luck has begun to run to my hand, I'll go out and ram his infernal—"

"Hark, I say! Don't you hear it? Not the preacher, but that dull, rumbling sound."

"It ain't nothin' but a storm. Thunder an' lightnin'! play away. I see you and go you two better."

But Bullwhacker Ben's opponent was already on his feet, disregarding his cards, and even the money he had staked, and gazing about him with the pallor of sudden panic.

"Gents!" he cried, appealing to the other occupants of the saloon, "is there any mountain reservoir among these hills to burst and wash out this gully? If there is, we're scooped! I've heard that sound before—I've been *thar!*—and I don't want no more in mine, you bet!"

The excited words of Hoss Johnson, the stage-driver, commanded immediate and universal attention, and a hush fell upon the Babel of profane and querulous discussion in Billy Williams's saloon.

In the stillness, the canyon was heard to reverberate with a dull, jarring sound.

Then again rose the ring ng voice of the crazy preacher, crying:

"Fly! Fly! The Lord God that reigneth forever is come to judge the world? Oh, the wailing and gnashing of teeth! Oh, the unavailing shrieks of anguish! Have mercy, oh, God! they know not what they do!"

Thrilled with unreasoning panic there was a simultaneous rush for the door, pell mell into the street, where other saloons were disgorging their rough bearded hordes.

In the darkness they gazed around at the black cliffs, at the black sky, at each other. The street was filled with shadowy forms. A tall, gaunt man, dressed in a long frock coat, and with lank gray locks hanging to his shoulders, was rushing through the crowd, his eyes ablaze, his arms tossed wildly aloft, shouting his warning.

For a moment his was the only voice heard. Then rose a wailing cry of terror, and every eye was turned up the ravine, while the crowd surged apart, leaving the middle of the street clear.

Swooping down upon the camp like a rushing wind, and just at hand, was discovered a troop of the strangest horsemen ever beheld by mortal sight.

The steeds themselves were uncanny monsters, breathing fire. Their hoofs gave forth, not the ringing clatter of the hoofs of earth-born horses, but that dull, jarring thud that had puzzled Hoss Johnson. Their headlong rush was like the swoop of ill-omened birds.

The riders who bestrode these equine monsters were fleshless skeletons—the same who, half an hour later, filled Foxy and Tidy Tip with horror and dread by the sight of their terrible vengeance.

Now, as they rode, their black mantles floated out behind, flapping in the wind like vampire wings.

Their weird torches were thrust forward, as if to light their way, while their javelins were carried at arm's length above their heads, pointing directly to the front.

Using no bridles, they must have guided their horses with their knees, if, indeed, such animals needed direction like their fellows of earthly mold.

No sound uttered these weird riders of the night, nor turned they their heads to the right nor to the left, but silently, swiftly, directly they rode, like unsubstantial phantoms.

Clinging to his horse's mane, with every muscle tense and rigid, in their midst rode Jim Kane!

In an agony of fear bordering on insanity, he seemed beyond the power of taking cognizance of his surroundings. It is doubtful whether he knew that he was passing through a camp where every one recognized him. As silent, as heedless as his ghostly companions he rode on with them.

Like the wind they swooped down upon the camp, passed through it, and were gone!

A deathlike silence reigned. The miners stood staring breathlessly at each other. The crazy preacher lay where he had fallen in a swoon.

Shivering with superstitious dread, the miners cowered close together in knots.

"Boys, that was Jim Kane!" said one.

"His spook!" suggested another.

"He's done fur!" declared a third.

Then dead silence fell.

After a while, a quavering voice said:—

"Boys, we hain't never treated the psalm-singer very white. I reckon ef we could git him to chin a prayer or two fur us, it wouldn't go bad. Ef you come down to bed-rock, this hyar is a mighty likely place fur the devil to drop on-to; and don't ye furgit it!"

The general sentiment on this proposition was left in doubt, since, before expression could be had, a panic was started, by a movement to exchange the darkness of the street for the light and sense of greater security of the various saloons. In the Western idiom, the crowd "stampeded for cover."

In a twinkling, a counter rush emptied the street and refilled the saloons, the laugh of some of the more reckless at the general scare lacking the boisterous ring of genuine Western hilarity.

Liquor was swallowed in abundance, to relieve a certain watery feeling in the stomach; but the interrupted revelry was not resumed. The "tiger" found no pilgrim eager to "clip his claws," and the painted sirens who formed the attraction of that part of Billy Williams's establishment called Terpsichorean Hall huddled together, mute and trembling, looking scared and miserable in their tawdry finery.

In the midst of the all-absorbing discussion of the "Death Riders," the door of the saloon was thrown open, to give admittance to the Little Giant, whose coming seemed to send a wave of relieved feeling through the crowd.

With a woman's ready wit, Hally had persuaded him that, his bowie having slipped partly from its sheath, she had drawn it forth, fearing that he might roll over upon it and be hurt, or at least awakened.

Knowing no reason to suspect her, and called away by the excitement in the street, he gave the matter no further thought.

"Boys," was his ringing salute, the moment he set foot within the saloon, "how many dare follow where I dare lead?"

For the first time in the history of Hell Hole, Joe Smedley's appeal failed to call forth an enthusiastic response. The men looked troubled, each waiting for some one else to speak.

"What! Not one?" cried the Little Giant, frowning slightly as he looked about on the downcast faces.

"Ye see, Cap," replied Bullwhacker Ben, a ponderous-limbed giant, with fists like sledge-hammers, and shaggy hair and bushy beard, and beetling eyebrows, and coarse black hair on arms and hands and bared breast—a veritable Esau. "Ye see, Cap, ary human I reckon we're all ready to mount. But spooks!—waal, I allow I kin bolt, hide and taller, ary galoot in shoe-leather what dast to stand up and call me a coward!—but spooks!—Cap, I don't want none in mine, an' that's a fact!"

"I foller suit!" said Dan the Devil, a bullet-headed little rascal, stocky in build, and with a prize-fighter's hair-cut, a black over-hanging mustache, and restless little bead-like black eyes.

No-likee-John, a man whose bent body, long arms, bony hands and wolfish face had earned him the reputation of having once eaten a Chinaman without salt, preserved a morose silence under his captain's eye.

"And you, Gordon?" asked the Little Giant, turning to a youth who sat with his small and elegantly-booted feet cocked up on a table, quietly drawing at a cigarette, in apparent indifference to the excitement around him.

Certainly not more than one-or-two-and-twenty, the pale, emaciated face and inflamed eyelids of "The Kid" proclaimed one old in debauchery. His shapely white hands were light on the trigger and deft in the manipulation of the "devil's bible" and in rolling the cigarettes which he smoked incessantly. For the rest, he wore the unexceptionable broadcloth and the ruffled and embroidered shirt-bosom and flashing diamond stud of the dandy sport.

"I have had a warning," he replied, with languid nonchalance. "If I go with you, I shall probably never return alive."

"Then you are afraid to go?"

Unruffled by the covert taunt, the Kid turned his slow eyes upon the captain's face through the thin spirals of cigarette smoke, and replied, coolly:

"I was never backed down by anything on top of the earth, or under it."

"I beg your pardon, Gordon. I might have known you better," was the ready acknowledgment of the Little Giant.

Then he harangued the crowd, trying to convince them that what they had seen was but a party of cleverly-masked men, seeking to strike terror by their weird appearance. But a story from Hoss Johnson overthrew his most forcible arguments in the minds of that ignorant and superstitious crowd.

"I've heared o' this thing before. Them thar was the Death Riders, a-takin' of Jim Kane's spook down below! Why, thar was the toughest cuss you ever see, down at Flatbush, what sold out to the old 'un; an' when he chipped in, thar couldn't a pine box be built what 'ud hold him—fact! Thar was death-lights, an' sich like, in his shanty fur six months; an' the boys had to jest let him lay thar an' rot!"

And so, like a lot of children, these men scared each other with ghost stories, until after midnight, when they were suddenly electrified by the bursting open of the door, through which an excited voice shouted:

"Boys, fur God's sake, quick! Thar's the devil to pay in Iron Despard's place!"

CHAPTER IV. THE FIRST DUEL.

IRON DESPARD had purchased the original Hole-in-the-hill claim and erected against the face of the cliff the most pretentious structure of which the camp boasted.

"None o' yer one-hoss dives, with taller dips on wooden sconces," had said Hoss Johnson, "but genuine chandeliers, with slathers of glass fixin's hangin' down, all the colors of the rainbow. And the Queen— But, thar! I'm done. Jest you wait!"

So the excitement waxed, no one but the workmen having been admitted to even a peep at the splendors of the hall, and Hoss Johnson's surmises resting on what he had seen at Nugget City.

With the gathering of dusk, but expectant crowd had already assembled before the saloon, when an almond-eyed son of the flowery kingdom emerged from the door with a gasoline lamp, such as is used by showmen and street venders, which he proceeded to hang from a pole, to the delight of the miners, who swore that "the shebang was to be run in style, and that's a fact!"

Behind Sam Lee came a man already known to the readers of "Captain Mask, the Lady Road Agent" (No. 193, HALF-DIME LIBRARY) but as his personal appearance was the pivot on which turned his destiny in Hell Hole it may not be amiss to describe him as he stood before the men with whom he was soon to enter upon a struggle for life and death.

He was tall and spare in build, with an erect, military bearing, and, indeed, a semi-military dress, for a long navy-blue cloak fell from his well-squared shoulders; his head was covered with a felt hat, with cord and tassels, after the cavalry fashion; and he wore spurs, as if always ready for the saddle.

But the most striking feature was the contrast between his jet-black hair and his pale face, in which his piercing black eyes burned like living coals. His brows met, and the effect of his long, straight nose was intensified by a drooping mustache.

"Gentlemen," he said, throwing wide the door, "I welcome you to the Palace Saloon. May good luck attend eveyone who crosses its threshold."

"That's the music!" shouted a brawny miner. "Three cheers for Iron Despard!"

While the air rung with their lusty salute, the crowd poured into the saloon. They found the chandelier Hoss Johnson had predicted, and a bar that was a marvel. But in an adjoining room was the crowning attraction.

There, as if enthroned, sat the Queen of the Green Cloth, attended on either hand by her croupiers.

"Welcome, gentleman!" she said, with an engaging smile that won all hearts. "Make up your game."

And instantly the cashier was besieged for chips.

Who could grumble at the fate awarded by such fair hands?

"Cleaned out?" shouted one, before the evening was far advanced. "But great Golconda! it's worth it!"

The advent of the Death Riders had been a damper on the opening night; but the fascinations of the Queen of the Green Cloth had proved sufficient to win the miners back to her shrine.

With slightly contracted eyes, as was his habit when well content, Iron Despard stood a little apart, and saw the golden tide setting toward his coffers.

"A little longer," he muttered, "then the grand transformation scene!"

Ah! had he known the transformation scene that fate held in store! Not that cherished in his heart, where he pictured his wife amid far different scenes, a queen, as now, but over a far worthier domain.

But suddenly the fairy towers and battlements of his air castle were shattered, like the bursting of a bubble. Let us see how.

Failing to secure men to go in search of Jim Kane, the Little Giant left Bill Williams's saloon, to meet, almost on its threshold an ex-pugilist of no mean prowess, who rejoiced in the name of Ten-strike Tom.

"Tom," was his abrupt salutation, "what is your life worth to you?"

"What's that, Cap?" was the astonished reply.

"What will you take to risk your life in a fair fight?"

"With shootin'-irons?"

"Exactly."

"Injun-fashion, ur—"

"In a square duel."

"Who with?"

"This new man—Iron Despard."

"Good God!"

Ten-strike Tom was profoundly impressed with the task set him.

"Look a-hyar, Cap," he said in an altered tone, "he's a bad man to handle, by all accounts. Can't we cook up somethin' that'll make it Committee biz? But single-handed! Thunder an' lightnin'!"

"No; that won't do," replied the captain of Vigilantes. "It's got to be man to man. I'd do it myself, but if my hand appeared in it, even if I rubbed him out, I would lose all that I am trying to gain. Next to myself, I thought I would give you the first chance—"

"Much obleeged, Cap, bein's as how he's a dead shot—so Hoss Johnson says, and I reckon he knows."

"Very well. If you are afraid—"

"Hold on, Cap! Whar's the man that said I was afraid?"

"What's your figure, then?"

"What kin you stand? What is it worth to you? Always rememberin' that if he scoops me in, I don't get a cent! Thunder and lightnin'!"

"If he drops you, I guarantee a first-class plant—"

"That's somethin', even to a dead man, I suppose!"

"If you strike him home, I'll give you a thousand dollars down."

"Eh? A what?"

And Ten-strike Tom cocked his head on one side in grotesque affectation of doubting the evidence of his ears.

"A thousand dollars in hard money," repeated the Little Giant.

"Putt'er thar!" was the hearty acceptance of the ex-pugilist, and his horny palm seemed to swallow up the slighter hand of the captain of the Vigilantes.

Then they put their heads together over the details of a plot the end of which they could not foresee.

In her place sat the Queen of the Green Cloth, so haughtily self-possessed that she seemed of a sphere entirely apart from and above the rude men about her; yet, with a covert watchfulness, she saw every one who entered the door.

She was waiting! waiting! until at last that for which she waited came!

The Little Giant sauntered in, and so potent was his sway, that the men of Hell Hole showed their deference even in the heat of the game on which their money was staked.

The woman saw this instinctive homage, and through her frame crept a subtle sense of pleasure. She hated herself for it, but was, nevertheless, powerless to prevent it, or to deceive herself as to its cause.

Outwardly she betrayed no sign that she had seen this man. Indeed, after that first glance, in which his searching eye had set something within her to vibrating like a harp-string, she did not again look at him, but continued to draw the cards from the box and place them to the right and left with mechanical precision, forgetting everything but him; for that glance had told her again the story that she had the day before interrupted on his lips—a simple tale:—

"I love you!"

And it awoke the old dreams and the old ecstasy; and the present fell away. For what woman ever outlives her first passionate love?—that lesson so easily learned, so hard to unlearn.

Like incense, a tranquilizing influence settled down upon her spirit—a sweet satisfaction and content. Then, out of that reverie came a rude awakening.

"Hold on, hyar! That don't take my money! I've been watchin' this hyar thing, and I sw'ar

It's a snide game! That nimble-fingered jade has hocus pocused them keerds jist once too many!"

It was Ten-strike Tom's harsh voice; and while one great paw grabbed his "pile," the other drew a revolver to enforce his claim.

The first impulse of the Queen of the Green Cloth was a start of amazement. But something drew her gaze from the face of the ruffian, brutalized by liquor and inflamed by passion, to that of the man who had engrossed all her thoughts. Perhaps it was an involuntary, instinctive appeal to him to avenge this insult.

Joe Smedley so read it. He flamed scarlet to the very roots of his hair; into his eyes leaped the fires of sudden rage; and he gathered himself as if to spring upon his own fool.

Somehow he had never thought of this—standing quietly by while she was insulted; and the suddenness of the shock made him for an instant lose sight of the fact that this was an essential part of his plan. But second thought followed at once; and, with her eye upon him, his muscles relaxed; his glance sunk to the floor; he turned as pale as death, and stood trembling from head to foot.

She saw it all, and—and—she felt no resentment!

But one there was whose fiery nature was stirred to its veriest depths.

Although forewarned, even Ten-strike Tom was not prepared for the whirlwind assault that was made upon him. He heard a hoarse, rasping cry, and turned to see a veritable demon hurl himself across the intervening space like a bolt from a catapult.

He had no time to use the pistol he had drawn. A grip of iron seized his wrist at the same time that bands of steel closed about his throat; and he was pressed backward upon the faro table.

With movements like lightning, Iron Despard pinioned his adversary's pistol-arm with his knee, and, drawing his bowie-knife with the hand thus liberated, raised it on high for the fatal plunge into the upturned breast of the helpless ruffian.

In this attitude he almost transcended humanity—he looked like an avenging fate. His brows were as black as night; his eyes blazed luridly; his face, contrasted with its framework of black hair, was unearthly in its pallor; the rage depicted on it was the fury of a fiend!

The effect on the miners was overwhelming. They shrunk away with a terror never before inspired by anything in human form. Only one intervened between Ten-strike Tom and swift death. The little Giant sprang forward and caught the descending arm.

"Hold!" he shouted. "Gentlemen do not settle their difficulties in this way—not in this camp. Here every man has a fair show."

Iron Despard did not relax the gripe on Ten-strike Tom's throat, nor lift the knee that pinioned his pistol-arm helplessly against his breast, nor yet lower the hand that held the gleaming bowie suspended over his heart. He only turned his head, so as to glare over his shoulder into the face of the man who had dared to come between him and his revenge.

Then between these two high-strung natures there was a silent battle of the eye, which the Queen of the Green Cloth watched with perfect outward composure, yet with an inward perturbation which a weaker nature could never know.

In the end Iron Despard asked in a low, hoarse voice:

"Who are you?"

"Joe Smedley, captain of the Vigilantes of Hell Hole!"

There was a significance in those words and in the undaunted directness with which the Little Giant looked into Iron Despard's eyes, for he was on his mettle, feeling, without looking at her, that the eyes of the Queen of the Green Cloth were upon him. Words and looks said:

"Strike, and we'll hang you higher than Haman!"

Perhaps Iron Despard read them in this way. It is no disparagement of a man's courage that he listens to the voice of common sense and avoids needlessly rushing upon the brutal death which a mob inflicts. As well reprobate him for not standing with foolhardy obstinacy in the line of a buffalo stampede.

"It's rather early in the day to come into collision with the authorities of this camp," said the gambler prince. "But I reckon you don't deny the right of any man to satisfaction. I'll give this hound the use of any weapon he chooses: but one of us must die!"

And instantly releasing Ten-strike Tom, he stood awaiting his election.

According to the laws and customs of the

mines, no exception could be taken to this proposal, and, as we know, it was in a line with the Little Giant's purpose; but, truth to tell, while he gasped for breath and swallowed spasmodically to relieve the pain in his throat, which felt as if it had been crushed, the ex-pugilist looked as if he had no great stomach for the now unavoidable fight.

But, as a savage walks unflinchingly to the stake, so in the breast of a man who has spent all his life in an atmosphere of violence, where cowardice is the last stigma that can attach to manhood, springs up reckless defiance of fate; and in this spirit Ten-strike Tom said:

"I'll take pistols in mine."

"Gentlemen, let us adjourn to a more suitable place than this," proposed the Little Giant, in tacit deference to the Queen of the Green Cloth.

But Iron Despard objected peremptorily.

"No!" he said, in a deep, ringing voice, that bespoke a will with which no man present cared to cope. "Across this table was the insult hurled—across this table shall it be washed out in blood! Take which end you choose; I will take the other; and this gentleman, or any other you may prefer, will give the signal."

"It's all one to me. As well hyar as anywhere," said Ten-strike Tom, assuming that bravado which is known as "a stiff upper lip."

While the duelists were taking their places, the Little Giant glanced at the Queen of the Green Cloth. She sat with her eyes on the pack of cards before her, her hand resting on the top one, as if only waiting the termination of this little affair with pistols, in which she had no interest, to resume her dealing.

"My God!" thought the captain of Vigilantes, "can she sit thus unmoved, and yet love him?"

Not upon the contestants, but upon her face, were his eyes fixed, when, standing opposite to her, with only the width of the table between, he said:

"Gentlemen, are you ready?"

There was a slight tremor of the lips, and perhaps a suspension of the breath—that was all.

From his end of the table, Iron Despard fixed his burning eyes upon his adversary, with a concentration of deadly purpose that completely unmanned the burly ex-pugilist.

"I'm dished!" was Tom's conviction; and a leaden weight bore upon his arm, and a strange ringing sounded in his ears, through which he heard Joe Smedley's rhythmic signal.

Like the tolling of doom it broke upon the awful stillness:

"One!—two!—THREE!"

Crack!—Crack!

There were two distinct pistol reports, one perhaps a quarter of a second after the other. Then came a heavy jarring fall.

The Queen of the Green Cloth knew at which end of the table it was. She cast one quick glance in the other direction, where Iron Despard stood erect and as firm as a rock, smiling upon her through the white smoke from his pistol.

There was a quick, tremulous inspiration through her parted lips. Then she said, ere yet the smoke of battle was cleared:

"Gentlemen, make up your game!"

But there came an unexpected interruption. Into the saloon staggered a man, breathless, bedraggled with mud, torn by briars, and bruised and bleeding from violent contact with jagged rocks.

Then rose the cry:

"Jim Kane! Jim Kane!"

CHAPTER V.

THE VAMPIRE.

BUT a second glance showed that the intruder was not Jim Kane, but Foxy, who was instantly surrounded by an excited crowd, the Little Giant crying:

"Good Lord, man! is it you? What is the matter? Where have you been? What has happened to you? Why, you're all broke up!"

"An' faith, yer honor," replied Foxy, lugubriously, "it's the Lord's blessed mercy that I'm alive this day, at all, at all, to be tellin' yez! I wish I could say that same o' Jimmy Kane, saints 'ase 'um, poor divil! And if Tidy Tip don't wake up this blessed morning and find 'umself dead intirely, it's no fault o' thim murderin' divils, bad luck till their h'athen shapes!"

And Foxy told his strange adventure to an audience whose open-mouthed credulity would have inspired a poet to eloquence.

"Be me sowl!" he declared, "they have no eyes and no stomachs an them; and it's the rattling o' their bones you're hearing whin they walk, and the whistling o' the wind through their ribs, so it is!"

That story was enough to keep Foxy in whisky and tobacco for the rest of his life—the first installment of which he took on the spot! But if Hell Hole didn't get the worth of its money, it was because of the natural limitations of the Irishman's fancy.

In vain did the Little Giant urge his theory of masked outlaws. Before superstition, doubly intrenched in ignorance, even his power failed. The logic of Hell Hole ran:

"Talk's all right in its place; but seein's believin'! The Cap's as square as a die, a white man cl'ar down to his toe-nails—we hain't discountin' that!—an' the joker an' both bowers in anything that consarns this hyar airth. But spooks!—waal, seein's believin'!"

Not until broad daylight could they be induced to go out for Jim Kane's body; and while they gazed upon the hanging horror the mad preacher's voice struck an icy chill to every heart:—

"It is the wrath of an outraged God fallen upon the wickedness of this abandoned place!"

Was he right? Did all Hell Hole rest under the curse? Who would be the next victim?

"Cut him down, boys," ordered Joe Smedley, adding portentously:—"I reckon these old mountains will bear music before long!"

In dead silence the men obeyed.

The rock behind which Foxy had crouched was found, but no trace of Tidy Tip.

A silent shake of the head showed the interpretation generally put upon this.

"And now," reflected the scheming captain of Vigilantes, "to turn all this to account—to play one enemy off against another. My dear Despard, I think I see you at the end of a somewhat crooked lane. I'm after you! Look out!"

Walking a little in advance of the rest with his particular set—Bullwhacker Ben, Dan the Devil, Foxy, No-likee-John, and the Kid—Joe Smedley said, in that guarded tone which suggests a clique of rascals:—

"Boys, whether or not you accept my explanation, that these are only men like ourselves, one thing is certain—they are striking at us! Not at the Vigilance Committee, but at our little crowd. Tip—and, depend upon it, they've got him!—makes the fifth. There are six of us left; and we're marked men! Now, shall we sit like a pack of shivering curs, each awaiting for his turn to be knocked over; or shall we strike back!"

The reply came from a most unexpected quarter, in the muttering thunder of No-likee-John's rumbling gutturals:

"Ef they're spooks, we're elected, and nothin' we kin do will make matters any worse; ef they're men, our only chance is to kick like thunder! so, fur one, I vote that we feed 'em on their own mutton."

"Johnny, my son," laughed the Kid, "you're very economical of chin-music; but when you wag your jaw, solid chunks of wisdom drop therefrom."

"Why, look here, fellers. When I was down in Canyon City I had the thunderin'est streak of luck you ever saw. I cleaned out everything in that section of the country; and, leaving Hank Sullivan's shebang for the last, gave him a week's notice to look out for me. The cuss got scart out, and went to Washikitwa, a squaw a hundred and fifty years old, for a charm to knock my luck. She prescribed a lizard's tongue fried in skunk's grease; and Hank paid Colorado Kate an even hundred dollars to get me outside of that comfortable little dose."

"A mighty fine article, Kate—A No. 1, and don't you forget it! When she let that red hair of hers down, until it fell about her like a veil—a yard and a quarter long, if it was an inch! thar wasn't a man in seven contiguous counties that wouldn't swear it was the prettiest thing he ever saw in his life!"

"Well, the little devil worked me for all I was worth. But when the thing was done, she lost her grip and got scart. Besides, while she was playing her little racket, she got a trifle sweet on your humble servant. So, all of a sudden she flopped and blowed the whole business."

"She took on woman fashion—told me I might kill her, and all that sort of business. But you know how that is yourselves, boys. I reckon you've all been thar. So I needn't tell you that I pinched her pretty cheek and swore that one of her tears was worth more than all the dust this side of Frisco."

"Well, there was no back-down to me, spell or no spell. I bucked that tiger, and he clawed me until I hadn't a stiver to bless myself with. Hank raked the chips home, and invited me to call again, whenever I was around that way."

breaking banks. I thought a minute. Then I stripped to the buff, and piled my whole outfit in gents' furnishing goods on the board. Hank said he wasn't in the habit of turning men naked into the street from his shebang. I whispered to him that, if he didn't want me to blow the snide spell business, he'd better turn the cards and stow his preaching.

"He wilted—the spell broke—my luck turned—I busted him sky-high! To cap the climax, Colorado Kate stuck to me like a mother-in-law, until she passed in her checks the night Bob Sloper's crowd cleaned out the Fandango Hall.

"So, gents, I say with No-likee-John, here:—When you're in for it anyway—kick!"

That was the kind of talk for that kind of men. Instead of opposing their superstition, and thereby turning them into mules of obstinacy, it fell in with and directed it. If there was no help for it, they were ready to fight man or devil.

"Boys," said the Little Giant, "this thing will enable us to fix a man who has no love for any of us, even if he isn't one of these mysterious slayers."

"Spot him, Cap!" said Bullwhacker Ben.

"Tony Murray."

"What's the matter wid him?" asked Dan the Devil.

But, instead of answering, the captain suddenly uttered a low, warning:—

"H's-s-st!"

It would have surprised Hell Hole to learn that its Vigilance Committee was run by a "ring" of scoundrels, with the popular captain at their head; and that the approach of an outsider suspended for a time the discussion of a plot by which this power was to be used for the purposes of private feud; yet such was the fact.

Causing the body of the murdered man to be laid on the ground before Billy Williams's saloon, where the vengeful passions of the crowd could feed on the ghastly spectacle, he leaped upon a stump, the tree from which had been felled for the purpose of forming this truly Western rostrum, and began a harangue, in the course of which he said:—

"But if you refuse to accept this simple view of the case, let us admit, for the sake of argument, that these are supernatural monsters. You have all heard of vampires?"

"That we have!" interrupted, with the breezy freedom of the Western plains and mountains, Hoss Johnson, whose fund of ghost stories, and marvels generally, seemed inexhaustible. "Thar was Everybody's Charley, I seen at Silver Riffle. The whitest man you ever see. He'd lend you his last dollar, and he'd be with you if you ever offered to pay it back."

"Charley had just one fault. When he had got gloriously corned, he always thought that his body was as big as his head had swelled to. So he never looked at the size of his constituents, but straddled anything that offered."

One day he went up to Taylor's Bend, and there he could put the hull infernal town in his breeches pocket. The Bandites kicked; and Charley tried to surround about a dozen of 'em with a lump, when he hadn't a backer within ten miles.

Fur a few minutes thar was jest one sweet came! Fur Charley slung a bunch o' fives that 'ud make a man think he carried a bass-drum on his shoulders, every time he reached fur him. But that day he seen two heads whar thar wasn't but one; and sometimes he struck at the wrong head.

"Waal, they downed him, and sot on him about seven deep. Charley swears that they had mashed him thinner than a postage-stamp, when the load begun to lift, and he seen 'em go in this way and that, as if a young tornader had broke loose among 'em. When he got on his pins he found himself shoulder to shoulder with a side-partner; and a mighty good man he was too; fur the pair of 'em cleaned out the hull gang, and then jumped the town before the reserves was called in."

"Charley and the new man struck hands on the spot; and they made just the orneriest team you ever see. Charley kicked the beam at a hundred and ninety, and never sweat a hair. He could talk you deaf, dumb and blind, and then toe the mark as fresh as a daisy and as rosy as a fall pippin. He could sing a nightingale out of breath, and jig the legs off a hull minstrel troupe, door-keeper and ticket-agent throwed in."

His pardner went about like a coffin on legs. He always looked hungry and chilly, like them cold water teetotalers in the State, what goes around with a hymn-book under their arm and

their stummiks all caved in. He didn't drink, nor chew, nor use bad language. Nobody knowed whar he come from; and he kept his mouth shut. But he had a bad eye; and you'd better believe thar didn't nobody go out o' their way to rub up ag'in' his shins. The boys called him the Undertaker, and let it go at that.

"Waal, gents, if you'll b'lieve me, from the day he run in double harness with the Undertaker, Everybody's Charley began to lose flesh and git white-livered. And as he got thin, his pardner got fat! Inside o' six months, Charley was flat on his back, and the undertaker was the healthiest-lookin' man in the camp."

"Silver Riffle was a mighty blue place, you bet yer boots! I reckon the boys would 'a' swore off their lick for another six months, to see Charley and his pard change places back ag'in. But nobody dropped to the racket, until one night Saphead Sam was hangin' out about three o'clock in the morning, and he seen the leetlest mite of a blue light in the winder of Charley's shanty. He swore it wasn't bigger'n a pin's head."

"Now, that softy was more knowledgable than the boys sot him down fur. So he slies up on tiptoe, and finds that a buffaloe-skin is hung before the winder, so that anybody, not seein' no light, would think that Charley and his pard was snorin' in their bunks, like honest men. But thar was the least mite of a hole in that skin; and what d'ye think that softy seen through that hole?"

Hoss Johnson paused in his narrative, and looked about on the gaping crowd, to note the effect of his dramatic suspense.

"What in blazes did he see?" demanded Bullwhacker Ben, while the rest remained agog.

"Waal, boys," resumed the narrator, impressively, "Saphead Sam is a liar, if he didn't see that room lighted up with a bluish-white light, which, you all know as well as I do, is the color of death-lights and spook-lights generally. Thar laid Everybody's Charley on his back, breathin' hard, like a drunken man, and on his breast, crosslegged, sot the very devil himself—hoofs, horns and tail! He was fannin' Charley with his wings—the shape of a bat's, and six foot long, both of 'em—to keep him asleep while he sucked blood from his throat."

"That's the way vampires always does. The next mornin', ef you had a spy-glass, you might find the leetlest might of a red speck on the man's throat that had been sucked—but that's all. Nobody that didn't drop to the racket would ever suspicion what was the matter with him."

"After he'd got his fill, the devil jumps down off o' Charley's breast, gives a whisk of his tail, and—hey, presto! he turns into the Undertaker, looking as fresh as if he'd jest had a square meal."

"An' by thunder, he had!" cried Bullwhacker Ben, excitedly, while the crowd murmured assent.

"Waal," pursued Hoss Johnson, "the light goes out, and leaves everything as dark as a pocket. Then he softly hears Charley wake up, and ask his pard fur a drink of water, fur the love o' God. The Undertaker tumbles out of his bunk, barks his shins on a stool or two, and at last lights a bit of candle. He gives Charley his drink, and asks him how he feels, in a die-away voice, as if it broke his heart to see his pard so nigh used up. Charley told him that a lime-kiln was a fool to the way he felt, as if he hadn't had a drop of anything to drink fur a week. Ye see, the poor devil didn't know that he hadn't more'n about a whisky-glassful o' blood in his hull body. Thet vampire had left him jest enough fur the first stake, so's not to bust him entirely; an' thar he was fillin' up with water, until he could manufacture some more blood, fur that skunk to suck out of him in a week's time! That's the way vampires does. Once a week is their rule."

At this monstrous thought the men of Hell Hole swore roundly.

"Waal," continued Hoss Johnson. Then he stopped abruptly, looking at the Little Giant, who still stood on the stump himself and his interrupted speech for the time forgotten in the absorbing interest of the vampire story.

"Beg your pardon, Cap; but I reckon you've got the floor. I didn't look to makin' this hyar yarn so long."

But the captain of Vigilantes was delighted with the effect being wrought, as it was in a direct line with his purpose.

"Go on! go on!" he said. "If I had known the story, I would have told it myself. Boys, just consider this a part of my speech, better than I could have put it."

"Go on! go on!" urged the crowd; and, thus indorsed, Hoss Johnson proceeded:—

"As I said before, that softy had an idee or two in his head, if it was cracked. He says nothing to nobody, but goes and casts six silver bullets, loads up his shootin'-iron, lays fur Mr. Undertaker, and empties the hull round into his carcage, layin' him out as flat as a flounder!"

"If it had been only fur the Undertaker himself, the boys might have run the softy out of town, and let him slide. But he was Charley's pard, and Charley had told the boys that he was better than he looked, and as how he had treated him like a white man, waitin' on him nights, and such like. So Saphead Sam stood a mighty likely show fur gittin' a taste of the longest rope this side o' sundown. But he belches the hull business, and, says he:—

"Don't take my word fur it, gents; but ef Everybody's Charley don't git well now, jist hang me up to dry—that's all."

"And he got well?" asked Bullwhacker Ben.

"Well?" repeated Hoss Johnson. "Ef he didn't, I'm a liar! But, gents, it was a bad speculation, after all, one way o' lookin' at it, fur Saphead Sam. The boys of Silver Riffle kept him jist pickled in free whisky, until he got the Old Man with the Poker after him, and jumped off a bluff. He got a boss send-off, though, and Everybody's Charley chinned a funeral sermon that 'ud jest knock the socks off from half o' them that the white-necktie fellers sarves up, in the States."

"And now, Cap, ef so be you kin begin whar you left off when I chipped in with my limber jaw whar it hadn't no business to be, I'll take a back seat fur a spell."

"Boys," cried the Little Giant, "I move three cheers and a hummer fur Hoss Johnson and his story!"

That was a master-stroke of diplomacy. The cheers were given with a right good will, every one feeling the generosity of their captain, who could volunteer such a tribute to one who had for the time taken his audience out of his hands. From that moment his hearers were wax to his touch.

In a few forcible words he applied the story just heard to the case in hand. If Jim Kane's murderers were not simply men, might they not be demons who, when not employed in their bloody work, assumed the form of men, and mingled unsuspected with their intended victims, drinking with them at the bar, sitting opposite to them at the card-table—nay, there in the very crowd before him, plotting their murders?

Having by such subtle insinuations worked upon his audience, until each man stood in his guard, grasping revolver or bowie, and viewing his neighbor askance with suspicion, he concluded, pointing a vibrant finger at the ghastly corpse which lay before him:

"Look at him! Look at him! A hundred gaping wounds! Murder like this will not down!—it cannot be hid!—it cries to Heaven for vengeance! Depend upon it, we shall spot our man before long. When we do, I call upon all honest men to rise up and make swift and sure work of him!"

Yell upon yell of menacing assent went up from the crowd, amid which the orator, having produced the effect desired, got down from his backwoods rostrum, and was about to retreat into the saloon, when Bullwhacker Ben shouted:

"Three cheers fur the Little Giant! Raise him, boys! Up he goes!"

And with Dan the Devil on the other side, the idol of the camp was "chaired" on the shoulders of his admirers, Foxy yelling himself, while No-likee-John scowled and the Kid smiled, each manifesting his cynicism according to his own peculiar temperament.

Of course guileless Hell Hole, while swelling the ovation, never felt the finger and thumb with which the "ring" led it by the nose. But politicians, the world over, are "up" to that little game!

That night Billy Williams's saloon was thronged, the candles on their wooden sconces struggling heroically with the heavy tobacco smoke. Oaths rose clear and distinct, above the rumbling Babel of voices. First one part of the room and then another was the scene of wrangling, which was soothed by some peace-maker more profane than the contestants.

From the midst of all this suddenly shot up a stentorian voice:

"Nailed, by thunder!"

Then there was a dull jar that made the glasses behind the bar jingle.

The crowd rushed toward the back end of the room, which was long and narrow. They saw Bullwhacker Ben in the act of rising to his feet,

his hand grasping the haft of a huge bowie whose glittering blade pinned a buckskin bag of gold dust to the table, its keen point sunk full an inch into the board by the tremendous blow. His eyes were fixed in savage accusation on a man who also had risen on the opposite side of the table, his face expressing the bewilderment of one suddenly sobered by a powerful shock.

The man was Tony Murray!

"Nailed!" shouted Bullwhacker Ben again, in a voice of thunder. "That pouch belonged to Jim Kane! You see his totem?—J. K."

Then from the crowd rose a blood-curdling groan of horror and rage.

"It's rough on you, Tony," reflected the Little Giant; "but it leads the way to Iron Despard!"

CHAPTER VI.

TREACHERY—THE SUMMONS.

It was true. The bowie had pierced the bag just between the two initials rudely traced upon it with India ink.

Tony Murray saw them in utter amazement. He did not realize then that he was the victim of a diabolical plot. He did not know that the tools of the Little Giant—the figure-head of law and order in Hell Hole—had got him drunk, so that, while he was gambling with Bullwhacker Ben, the nimble-fingered Kid could filch his bag of gold-dust and substitute this fatally marked one.

"Gents!" shouted Bullwhacker Ben, "this is one of our men, at any rate! This hyar is the vampire what drinks men's blood! This hyar—"

But even his bull-like voice was drowned.

"Down him! Down him! The VAMPIRE!" yelled, Dan the Devil, No-likee-John and Foxy in a breath, the Kid having quietly "slid" when his work was accomplished. He was a skilled laborer, and left the "cattle trampling" to his ruder colleagues.

That menacing cry passed from lip to lip like fire in the prairie grass. Tony Murray saw that he would be torn to pieces before he could enter a protest. Even his voice, not to mention his words, would never be heard by his destroyers. Pistols and bowie-knives were in every hand. Half a hundred passion-inflamed eyes glared upon him. A sudden, savage dash was his only hope, and that of the slenderest.

"BACK!" he yelled, and, drawing both revolvers, fired directly into the crowd, and leaped forward.

Now the fiendish brutality of those murders stood him in good stead. The men were afraid of the supposed vampire, and scattered like sheep before his sudden onslaught. With a bound he burst through that cordon of death, and, turning and running backward continued to fire at his pursuers, who poured a perfect leaden hail after him.

A glance over his shoulder, a leap into the air and he crashed through the window backward, carrying sash and glass, and rolled on the ground in the street.

Blinded, stunned, bleeding from a score of wounds, the hunted man scrambled to his feet, tore free the hitching strap by which a horse was fastened before the saloon, and was in the act of mounting when the mob rushed pell-mell through the door. Luckily one stumbled, and several others fell over him in a heap, forming a temporary blockade, which enabled Tony Murray to gain the saddle, and dash away into the night.

Then pandemonium reigned, until the voice of the Little Giant commanded attention.

"Give me half a dozen men," he declared, "and I will never return without the murderer or his scalp."

Wild were the cheers; and all Hell Hole contended for the honor of being numbered in this expedition. But the captain of Vigilantes selected those whom he wished—Bullwhacker Ben, Dan the Devil, Foxy, No-likee-John and the Kid—declaring that a greater number would be unwieldy, and well-mounted, armed and provisioned for several days, they, on the following morning, set out in pursuit.

Three days later Bullwhacker Ben shouted exultantly:

"Boys, we've got him! Thar ain't no outlet to this pocket."

And sure enough they came upon the fugitive far up in a narrow glen, kept in perpetual twilight by the towering walls of granite and the evergreen pines.

Gaunt with hunger and exposure, and wild-eyed with the dread of death, Tony Murray realized that he was never to leave that glen alive. But he resolved to make a desperate fight, selling his life as dearly as possible.

His horse, of no further use to carry him, he shot through the head, that its body might serve as a barrier. Lying behind this, he challenged his pursuers.

"Joe Smedley," he cried, "I know you and your crowd. Some day the boys will find you out for the white-livered fraud that you are; and they'll snatch you bald-headed! You think you've put up a neat thing on me; and maybe you'll rub me out. But you've got to come here and fetch me, first; and I'll do my purtiest to score my mark on some o' you, while you're a-doin' of it. Now you can open the ball as soon as you get ready."

"Surrender, and you will have a fair trial," replied the Little Giant. "If you can tell the boys where you got that bag of Jim Kane's, I'll be the first to let up on you."

"Too thin, cully! I know your leetle game!"

"All right. I swore to fetch you or your scalp into town; and I'll do one or the other, as sure as my name is Joe Smedley! I reckon a full hand of carbines will rake your pair of sixes. Don't you think so?"

There was unanswerable logic in this menace. Without waiting for Murray's reply, the Little Giant continued:

"Deploy, boys; and mind that you don't spoil him for hanging."

With a growl of assent, the men began to climb the sides of the ravine, in which they were soon stopped by a perpendicular wall, but not before they had gained an elevation from which they could fire over the body of the horse. There, out of range of Tony Murray's revolvers, they opened fire.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Their helpless victim groaned and writhed in agony. Then they went up to him fearlessly. Both arms were helpless. He could but glare at them.

"Your time will come!" he said; but the Little Giant laughed, as he ordered him to be hanged to the nearest tree.

With right good will the order was executed; and when an hour later, the Vigilantes rode from the glen, their chief carried a fresh scalp at his belt.

Into Hell Hole they dashed through a cheering, yelling crowd, swung from the saddle, and entered Billy Williams's saloon, where the Little Giant threw the scalp upon the bar, saying:

"There, gentlemen, is the report of your Committee!"

Shout upon shout rose, until the rafters rung again. There was a dash about this young captain which touched a chord in the breasts of those rough fellows.

From their midst he sought the solitude of the mountain road, to let the cool breeze that sweeps down the gulch fan his fevered temples, and to commune in the moonlight with his teeming thoughts.

"It was a master-stroke!" he cried, within himself, exultantly. "They are ready to see a vampire in any man who is boldly accused. And this fellow's devilish temper will make him easy game for my net. Only I must not make a false cast. The first impression cost Tenstrike's life; but it was worth it. It has been forgotten in this new sensation, but, trust me, I'll revive it!"

"Now, who's to be the next lucky man? He raked the board with a full hand of revolvers, last time; suppose we try him next on bowies! That points to Bullwhacker Ben. If he cuts his cursed heart out, all right; if he, too, gets worsted, it will be step two in our vampire game."

"By Heaven! lives are the chips that I play with, in this exhilarating game. But the beauty of it is, they cost me nothing."

But there came a startling interruption—a whizzing sound, a puff of wind on his cheek, and a dull, sodden thud in the trunk of a tree close beside him.

To drop to the ground as if shot was the instinct of a man trained to meet all sorts of danger. A serpentlike movement carried him to the other side of the tree; then the perfect stillness of the night was unbroken, save by an occasional yell from the direction of the camp.

He knew what to look for, and where to find it—an arrow sticking in the tree-trunk, on a line with a man's head. But a leaflike appendage to the shaft, close to its head, which swung and twirled in the passing breeze, was an hour-long puzzle, while he waited, watching and listening for a supposed foe, until the rotation of the earth solved the riddle with a stray moonbeam, showing him a piece of buckskin traced with rude characters in vermilion.

It was a bit of Indian symbol writing—the figure of a man holding what might be taken

for a revolver, a wigwam with a snake traced on it, and between them an arrow pointing toward the wigwam.

By way of signature, as the Little Giant afterward learned to this primitive missive—for message it evidently was, of some purport—was attached the button from a rattlesnake's tail.

At a loss to guess its significance, yet, it must be confessed, made somewhat uneasy by the mystery, Joe Smedley made his way back to Hell Hole. Here he was lucky enough to find an interpreter in the first man consulted, perhaps the only one in the place who could have thrown any light on the matter.

"Why, Cap," said the Kid, "that button is the totem of Washikitwa! But what in the deuce is she doing up this way; and what did she send you this thing for?"

"But what does it all mean to begin with?" was the natural interrogatory of the captain of Vigilantes.

"Well, let me see," said the Kid, studying the inscription. "That's a medicine lodge having a snake on it—her wigwam, of course. Then this man with— Eh? A pipe? No. A tomahawk? N—n—no. H'm!—what the devil is it? Oh! Here we have it—a revolver. There's the curved butt, you see; this is the barrel, and these six dots show that it is a six-shooter—as plain as the nose on your face!"

"Ye—e—es, I suppose so; but it's confoundedly far-fetched."

"Nevertheless, it indicates a white man, and, of course, you."

"Good Lord, Gordon! do I look anything like that?" laughed the Little Giant, eying the rude character whimsically.

"Most noble captain, I'll have to leave you to be your own judge—out of consideration for your feelings!" replied the Kid. "Meanwhile, this arrow plainly conveys a summons to her lodge."

"A summons!"

"Summons or invitation—it's all the same to royalty, you know."

"But where will I find her?"

"That I can't say. But she must be somewhere in this neighborhood—anywhere within ten miles. You'll have to hunt her up."

"But what in the deuce do I want with the old feldam? To the devil with her summons! If she wants to see me, let her come where I am."

"Yes, that's the white way of looking at it. To you and me she is nothing but a maudering old hag; but with a red-skin, her hundred and fifty years commands the reverence due to a god, while he is more afraid of her than the average white man is of the devil—or than he would be if the old fellow were to suddenly appear before him out of the ground. And perhaps it's worth a white man's while not to disregard that invitation."

"What will come of it if I do?"

"Well, your friends will probably be hunting around for your scalp one of these days."

"But may there not be treachery back of this?"

"I don't believe there is."

"Well, curse me if I don't follow it up, anyway!"

This resolve was scarcely taken, when the echoes of the gulch were awakened by a clatter of hoofs at a dead gallop. The rider, as he threw himself from the saddle and rushed into Billy Williams's saloon, seemed half dead with fright.

"Boys," he said, "I'm a dead man!"

"Nonsense, Johnny! What are you tryin' to git through ye?"

"I've jest seen the devil!"

This statement was received in dead silence, the faces of the auditors lengthening perceptibly.

The Skeleton Riders, the horrible death of Jim Kane, the disappearance of Tidy Tip, and, finally, the extermination of Tony Murray, whom every one firmly believed to have been a vampire—these tragic events, fresh in the minds of all, prepared them to receive any startling announcement.

"Whar'd ye see him? What did he look like? What did he do? How in Cain did you git away? Give us all the p'int, Johnny. Spit it out lively!"

And the crowd gathered closer about the man who had cast himself upon a bench dejectedly.

"Waal, ye see, it was up by the Mission Ridge—a place where the castellated rocks suggested the ruins of the old Californian missions. 'I was feelin' a leetle shaky, I allow, what with Death Riders an' vampires an' sich, as every man hyar knows is mighty scaly critters to meet out alone nights. All of a sudden my hoss gives a shy that nigh set me on my head, an' right up out o' the ground riz the old'un

himself! I jist got a glimpse, an' that hoss streaked it fur camp, an' I didn't try to stop him, nuther, you bet!"

"But what was he like?"

"Waal, sir, I reckon he wa'n't an inch above three foot high. He had horns jest like a buffalor, an' long black ha'r what hung down all about him, cl'ar to the ground. Ef he had any face on him it was underneath this ha'r, 'cause I didn't see nothin' but the horns an' ha'r. He jabbed a pitch-fork at me, an' said somethin' what wa'n't human lingo. Boys, the spell's on me. I feel it in my bones. I hain't got nothin' in this hyar world to keer fur but a little crippled sister in Evansville, Ingianna. Ef I git rubbed out one o' these dark nights, you'll find a map of a lead that I've been workin' on the sly, an' a little *cache* o' dust that I've been layin' by, sewed in my belt. I hope some o' ye'll be honest enough to find it, an' send her what the thing's worth."

His faculties dulled by the deep dejection which he mistook for a spell, and for the time thinking more of the sister he loved than of his surroundings, Johnny Dabb had been betrayed into a very foolish thing. While most of his auditors felt only dread of the supernatural influences that seemed to environ the camp, threatening the safety of all, one resolved to constitute himself the agent for the fulfillment of the warning, by knocking Johnny on the head, or tucking a bowie up under his jacket, with a view to possessing himself of that secret mine and *cache*.

Having heard Johnny Dabb's description of the devil, the Kid said to his superior:

"That is Washikitwa. Seek her somewhere among the Mission Ridge crags."

On the following day the Little Giant repaired thither, and, after considerable search, found the lodge of the Indian seers. It was rudely constructed of skins black with age, and hung about with the bodies of snakes, lizards, bats, toads—all those reptiles whose repulsiveness has inspired ignorance with superstitious fears ever since the world began.

As there was no external sign of life, Joe Smedley ventured to lift the flap and enter. Squatted on the ground he saw an object which thrilled even his stout heart with dread.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECOND DUEL.

As Johnny Dabb had described them, there were the buffalo-horns, from which fell coarse horse-hair. It was light enough in the wigwag for Joe Smedley to distinguish through this veil of hair the bent form of an old Indian hag, so emaciated as to look like a parchment-covered skeleton. The face was wrinkled almost out of human semblance. The eyes were closed. She sat clasping her knees. She might have been asleep or dead. Only a slight motion of the hair that fell before her face indicated that she breathed.

Knowing the strange habits of these people, the Little Giant sat down and waited patiently for the enchantress to notice his presence. Meanwhile he amused himself by looking her over.

She was hung all over with charms—oddly-shaped bits of wood or crude metal, shells, pebbles and bones. There were the fangs and rattles of snakes, the teeth of animals, tufts of hair, and bits of dried hide. All these were fashioned into pendants which fringed the whole rims of her ears, and necklaces that hung upon her bare breast, besides being worked into grotesque figures that covered her garments.

For a good two hours Joe Smedley's patience held out, though sorely tried. Then, as the figure before him had not once changed its position, though he had moved restlessly and coughed to rouse the old witch, if she were sleeping, he asked:

"What would Washikitwa with the Little Giant? He is here. His ears are open."

He might as well have talked to a wooden image. Washikitwa never so much as moved an eyelid.

After waiting perhaps an hour longer, he got up and left the old hag just as he had found her.

The Kid laughed when appealed to for an explanation of his strange reception, out of his Indian lore.

Something amiss," he said. "You didn't go a-ser in the right time, perhaps. The devil umself couldn't always tell what whims seize his imps. You'll hear from her again."

And he did.

On going to his cabin, he found a piece of bark lying on the doorstep, bearing the figure of a serpent coiled around a tree.

"Didn't I tell you? She wants you at midnight," was the Kid's interpretation.

"The deuce she does! replied the Little Giant, reflecting, not without some secret misgivings, on a midnight interview with that weird creature."

But before midnight another matter claimed his attention.

The superior attractiveness of Iron Despard's Palace Saloon made it the favorite place of resort. The other saloon-keepers, being hurt in that tenderest spot, the pocket, were disposed to make common cause against him. At any rate, they and their particular friends would be likely to rally to the support of any one who incurred the hostility of the new man.

It was early evening, yet both the drinking saloon and the gambling hall of Iron Despard's place were crowded, when the door opened, to give admittance to Bullwhacker Ben, followed by a man whose individuality had been made so secondary to that of the woman in whose establishment he acted in the capacity of fighting-man, that he was known only as "Moll Pritchard's Right Bower," which was clipped to "Bower" when he was directly addressed. Three others, known collectively as "Billy Williams's gang," and representatives from the "Dew Drop Inn," the "Way Side," the "Miner's Delight," and "Muldoon's Elbow" (suggested by that descriptive bit of slang—"crooking one's elbow") accompanied these doughty warriors to see fair play.

By all this, it will be seen that the matter had been "cooked up" very nicely. The very men who "took a hand" did not "drop" to the Little Giant anywhere in the "deal."

Taking his stand in the middle of the barroom, Bullwhacker Ben demanded, boldly:—

"Whar's this new man, Iron Despard?"

Iron Despard "spotted" the army that had dropped on him.

"So these fellows have concluded to pool their interests, and run me out?" he reflected, as he stepped forward in his cool way.

"Well, stranger, I reckon I'm the man you're looking for," he said to the ex-bullwhacker.

The latter eyed him insolently from head to foot, and then asked:—

"Is this all thar is of ye?"

"There is probably enough of me to answer your purpose," replied the gambler prince. "What do you want?"

"Waal, boss," said Bullwhacker Ben, assuming a blustering tone, "you've come to this hyar town with yer new-fangled gimcracks, a-tryin' fur to hold over better men than you be, any day, an' men that the boys has knowed ever sence the place was opened up. Now, that thar's all right, ef you've got the sand to back it, but you've got to 'arn yer footin' in this hyar berg. So we've come to say that you've either got to *git*, or *kick*!"

"Is that all that you have to say?" asked Iron Despard, with perfect coolness.

"I reckon as how it is."

"Well, this is my reply: To begin with, you lie, when you say that you have a better man than I am in this town. In the second place, I have the sand, and shall most certainly *kick*."

Without a word further Bullwhacker Ben made a great parade of pulling off his hat and handing it to Moll Pritchard's Right Bower, and rolling the sleeves of his shirt up above the elbow.

"Boss," he said, "will you have it in hyar, or outside?"

"Have what?" asked Iron Despard.

"The length o' this hyar beauty!" replied Bullwhacker Ben, whipping out his bowie with a flourish.

"As I should prefer not to dirty the floor of my place with your blood, I will accommodate you outside, if it is all the same to you," was the cool rejoinder.

"Oh, you'll find me a mighty easy man to git along with," affirmed Bullwhacker Ben. "Either way, you wouldn't have the cleanin'-up on yer hands. 'Bout face, boys. This hyar meetin's adjourned to the street."

Iron Despard turned to the men in his saloon.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am a stranger among you; but I reckon there's white men enough in this town to see fair play. You know the crowd that has raided me to-night, perhaps better than I do. Now, I'm ready to take them all, one at a time, or, if that don't suit, two at a time, provided they face me; but I don't want any blows in the back—"

"And, by thunder, pardner, you sha'n't have none!" cried Hoss Johnson. "Ain't that so, Joe?" he pursued, appealing to the Little Giant.

"We are not murderers here. Every white

man has a fair show," replied the captain of Vigilantes, coldly.

"Thar!" exclaimed Hoss Johnson, who had no fine ear for shades of tone. "You hyar what the Cap says, an' I reckon ef he don't run this hyar camp, thar don't nobody!"

Iron Despard looked from Hoss Johnson to Joe Smedley. The former he saw at once was an honest fellow whom it would do to "tie" to. Although he knew nothing of the relations of the latter with the Queen of the Green Cloth, he had instinctively felt his hostility at first sight. Now he began to perceive dimly that the real fight was with this man. He concluded that Joe Smedley feared his rival popularity.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said, making his address general. "If you will step outside I will try to show you some fun."

As we have already described it, the street in front of the Palace Saloon was brilliantly illuminated by a large gasoline lamp, such as is used by showmen.

The reader will remember that Iron Despard wore a long military cloak. This he removed together with his coat, taking somewhere from their folds, as he handed them to Hoss Johnson, a bowie-knife which fairly matched the huge weapon of Bullwhacker Ben. This was the first surprise, as few men carried so formidable an instrument of death.

From the bosom of his "b'iled" shirt flashed a dazzling cross of ten large diamonds—a king's ransom in value—his possession of which no one would have suspected from his perfect freedom of display in dress.

The miners began to perceive that this was a new manner of man, who wore thousands of dollars in gems concealed from the eye of the world, merely for his personal satisfaction.

He next removed his spurs and hat, and then bound a fine silk handkerchief about his head to keep his long hair from falling before his eyes. Lastly, he rolled up the sleeves of his linen shirt and of a silk undershirt, disclosing an arm which called forth from the crowd a murmur of surprise and admiration.

Beneath a skin as smooth and white as alabaster, the muscles lay folded one upon the other like bands of steel.

"Pardon me for keeping you so long waiting. I am ready," he said, confronting Bullwhacker Ben in an attitude of perfect grace and strength, and fixing his glittering eyes upon those of his adversary with that fascinating intensity peculiar to them.

Bullwhacker Ben had drank just enough liquor to put him in fighting trim; and though he realized that he had no "chicken," to deal with, he "came to the scratch smiling."

Their knives clashed with a blood-curdling gride. Then they began to circle slowly round each other—toe to toe, eye to eye!

The spectators stood breathless.

Suddenly the men began to writhe, their knives flashing in every direction. Click! Click! Click! Clash! Clash! Clash! *Gr-r-ride!*

"A-a-ah!"

With a yell of pain, Bullwhacker Ben sprang back, clapping his hand to his neck. But the abject terror in his face passed into a look of savage, vindictive hate as he discovered that it was but a slight flesh wound.

No change came over the settled purpose of Iron Despard's face. With the wary step of a panther he followed his man up, giving him no breathing spell.

Again their knives clashed. And now, thoroughly warmed to the work, they fought with stubborn obstinacy.

Such exhibitions of strength, agility, dexterity! Although Bullwhacker Ben overtopped his adversary by at least two inches, and was proportionately heavier and stronger at a dead strain, besides having the advantage of a longer reach, Iron Despard had a wrist of steel, and a supple pliancy of body that enabled him to assume all attitudes with the elusive quickness of an eel.

But suddenly the partisans of the giant bullwhacker uttered a yell of exultation, as they saw their champion at the same moment tear the handkerchief from Iron Despard's head, and deal him a savage thrust in the side.

The gambler prince uttered no cry, nor did he flinch back; but over the whole man came a terrible change. That wound seemed to turn him into a veritable demon. The wind blew his black hair over his face, so that he had to brush it back with his hand, giving Bullwhacker Ben the advantage he had sought.

But the face thus revealed was ghastly in its pallor, murderous in its blazing eyes and gleaming teeth. Now Iron Despard forced the fighting man to a desperate ferocity that thrilled

the spectators with terror. As again and again he dashed the hair from his eyes with his left hand, which was dripping with blood from the wound in his arm, where Bullwhacker Ben's murderous thrust at his side had taken effect, his ghastly face became smirched with crimson until it was a thing of horror.

It daunted Bullwhacker Ben. The thought flashed through his mind that this might be a vampire with whom he was fighting. The sustained ferocity of this onslaught made all that had gone before it seem mere child's play. From fighting purely on the defensive, the giant bullwhacker began to yield ground, backing now this way, now that. But ever Iron Despard followed him up like an irresistible fate.

The crowd now saw that if the gambler's wind held out, his adversary was a doomed man. They had to surge back and forth to make way before the constantly shifting contestants. Yells of fear, shouts of encouragement, cries of direction or warning filled the air. Men came rushing from all directions, to swell the crowd, until all Hell Hole was on the spot.

Bullwhacker Ben's friends showed a disposition to break up the fight; but there were disinterested lovers of fair-play, who, under the lead of Hoss Johnson, exerted themselves to keep the space about the duelists clear.

Suddenly with a yell of terror, Bullwhacker Ben turned and ran, dodging this way and that.

"Turn! turn! or I will strike you in the back!" cried Iron Despard, as he followed him with suspended knife.

"Enough! enough! Ben's got enough!" yelled his friend. "Stop him! Keep him off!"

"It was to the death!" cried the Demon Duelist; for now he looked a veritable demon. "Turn! Turn!"

As he spoke, he seized the fugitive by the hair.

Bullwhacker Ben turned and tried to ward off the expected blow.

But his guard was beaten down and the murderous bowie plunged into his side, again and again and again!

The first blow had pierced his heart; and dropping his bowie, he only writhed in the agonies of death, seeking to tear a stinging scorpion from his breast. But his implacable foe, who now seemed insane with passion, held him up with one hand, with almost incredible strength, while he added blow upon blow.

Yells of dismay rent the crowd. To the minds of all recurred the spectacle of Jim Kane's body, with its hundred gaping wounds. No one dared approach the Demon Duelist, to snatch his victim away.

At last Iron Despard dropped the lifeless corpse, and, once more tearing his bloody hair from before his madly-glaring eyes, and holding his reeking knife in readiness, addressed the crowd.

"Men of Hell Hole, I don't know the extent of the wound I have received—it may be my death. If it is, this will be my last chance to get even with certain parties in this town who have cliqued together for the purpose of running me out of it. You know, as well as I do, that the fight with Ten-strike Tom, like this one, was forced upon me. Now, I accuse nobody in particular; but there is somebody back of these men who has bounded them on. *That's the man I want to meet!* If there is a man in all Hell Hole who has a quarrel with me, let him come now, backed by all the curs that he has ready to set barking at my heels!"

No one daring to accept this bold challenge, a dead silence reigned.

The door of the Palace Saloon opened, and the Queen of the Green Cloth came forth. The crowd opened before her, and she passed through them, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

Reaching Iron Despard's side, she stopped so as to clasp him about the thighs, and so bring his weight upon her shoulder, as she lifted him.

At that moment came the reaction. The bloody knife dropped from his nerveless hand; his head sunk upon his breast; and he lopped over upon the woman, unconscious.

Seeing her purpose, Hoss Johnson sprang forward to relieve her of so disproportioned a burden; but staggering erect, she said, in a low, hoarse voice:

"Don't interfere with me!"

Constrained to obedience by her imperious manner, he desisted.

Joe Smedley suddenly set his teeth and clinched his hands, in a spasm of jealous fury that nearly forced a cry of furious protest from his lips; but the woman never looked his way.

In dead silence the crowd saw her pass

through their midst and enter the saloon, when the door closed behind her.

What manner of woman was this?

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WARNING.

INSTEAD of dispersing, the crowd before the Palace Saloon gathered into knots, to discuss the tragedy that had just been enacted. Many thought that the gambler prince had got his death-blow. Some observed an ominous silence, scowling gloomily.

Having left directions for the burial of Bullwhacker Ben, the Little Giant went to his appointment with the Indian seeress.

In one respect he was not satisfied with the progress of events. He could not get out of his mind the spectacle of the Queen of the Green Cloth carrying the wounded man in her arms. If she loved Iron Despard as that act seemed to indicate, where were Joe Smedley's chances?

Wild and weird was the spot toward which the captain of Vigilantes bent his steps. The rocks rose in fantastic shapes on every hand. The wind sighed dismally through the pines. The sky was hung with hurrying clouds, which now disclosed and now obscured a thin crescent moon, filling the scene with uncertain shadows. It taxed even his nerve to face both the real and the fanciful terrors of that place, on such an errand.

He found the medicine lodge as before. Beside it the Indian witch was stirring a kettle which was hung from three sticks. The fire, fed with resinous wood, gave forth a dense cloud of black smoke, which, after enveloping the conjurer, so that with the play of the wind she was sometimes visible, framed in its edging folds, and sometimes completely hidden from sight, rose against the face of a cliff, the top of which was shadowed by overhanging pines.

At sight of the Little Giant, Washikitwa raised her hand, interdicting a nearer approach. He stopped and waited.

The medicine-woman began to chant a low, yet wild monody. The steam that rose from her kettle gradually assumed a faint luminosity. The clouds, gathering thicker, wrapped all else in blackest night.

At first the faint radiance from the pot showed the upper half of the old Indian's body—her buffalo-horns head-dress and her wrinkled face, seen through the veil of horse-hair.

Gradually the figure became indistinct, until its outlines were lost. Then it reappeared, with an effect like that of dissolving views.

But behold a change most marvelous! No longer the Indian witch, but the beautiful siren who had so nearly lured the Little Giant over a precipice!

Again was the man paralyzed by that abject terror. He felt rooted to the spot.

A voice like the sighing of the winds came to him across the witch's caldron:—

"*Forego your wicked purpose! Be warned! Be warned!*"

Then the strange vision faded out, until a dense cloud of smoke arose enveloping all. When it cleared away again, the witch stood in her place, stirring the pot and mumbling her barbarous chant.

With a blind impulse to do he knew not what, Joe Smedley took a step forward. But at that instant his senses were wrapped in oblivion, as before they had been on the verge of the cliff.

The Little Giant recovered consciousness, to find the night transformed into day. In wonder he gazed about him. The medicine-lodge and the Indian sorceress were gone. He might have thought it all a dream, but that a pile of ashes marked the spot of the fire from which had risen so marvelous a vision.

There was a dull, throbbing pain in his head, and his thoughts were confused. Slowly he left the spot.

And now, what was the outcome of it all? Were the powers of the invisible world arrayed against his project? If so, should he yield to them, or persist in his purpose in despite of them?

Thus far no malign influence had fallen upon him personally; but the agents of his will had both been destroyed.

Instead of returning directly to the camp, he made a semi-circuit among the crags, in order to be longer alone with his thoughts. Coming out into the road which approached the camp from below, his attention was attracted by the sound of a horse ridden at an easy canter, which was arrested while he listened. Then came the sound of a woman's voice.

Creeping forward he came upon a surprise—not a pleasant one—Hally face to face with the Queen of the Green Cloth!

"I beg your pardon for stopping you," she said, while her face was the battle-ground of contending emotions; "but I have that which I must say to you."

"What is it my good woman?" asked the Queen of the Green Cloth, with lofty patronage.

A flush of resentment came to Hally's cheek, and a flash to her eye, which, however, she struggled to curb.

"I hardly know how to begin," she said, in a tremulous voice. "It is an appeal to your generosity—"

The Queen of the Green Cloth at once made a move to draw forth her purse.

"Not that! not that!" cried Hally, starting back, as proud as the haughty beauty before her. "I am not a beggar—at least not for money. All I ask is my proper due."

"I am at a loss to guess how I can serve you," said the Queen of the Green Cloth, looking at the other curiously.

"By not robbing me of that which is of more value to me than all else in the world—*Joe Smedley's love!*" was the response, in a burst of pain, humiliation, and heart-wrung entreaty; and the speaker extended her clasped hands, while her eyes filled with tears, and her lips quivered with sobs.

"He is *mine!*" she went on, passionately. "You have no right to him! Is it not enough—"

"Stop!" cried the Queen of the Green Cloth, raising her hand, imperiously, "I have nothing to do with Mr. Smedley, or any other. I am a stranger in this place, and am not on speaking terms with a single man here, except my husband and those in his employ, and with them only when business requires it. Your jealousy is absurd—"

"Listen to me, and then I will leave it to your fairness whether it is or not. Ten years ago Joe Smedley won the love of a girl who would have walked over burning plowshares to conduce in the slightest degree to his happiness. For him she sacrificed all that a woman can yield up—not grudgingly, but freely, gladly, without a trace of regret; more than repaid by his smile. For a few short months she lived in a fool's paradise. Then came the awakening. I will not go into the details of that terrible agony—that death in life! He saw another—yourself. For love of you he cast off one whose life was bound up in his love, and so drove her to suicide."

"A year ago I met him in San Francisco. I knew the story of the woman whose heart he had broken; but I came under his fascination, and for well or ill risked my happiness where she had wrecked hers."

"Of his past relations with you, and what led to the rupture between you, I know nothing. I only know that he loves you still, and is seeking you again. If you reject him so decidedly as to leave no ground for hope, I may still be able to retain him, with at least the outward manifestations of love. My God! it is so little that I ask! *Don't break my heart as you did the heart of that other!*"

Tears rained from her eyes; her voice was broken by sobs; in the abandonment of supplication she clasped the skirt of Hortense Dangerfield's riding-habit.

The Queen of the Green Cloth was not moved to womanly compassion by this piteous spectacle. She said, coldly:

"I pass over the questionable compliment of such an appeal to a woman already married. But go home and free your mind of this foolish jealousy. Mr. Smedley is nothing to me, nor I to him. And now, if you will excuse me—"

She touched her horse with the whip and rode on.

Hally looked after her with a dead despair in her face.

"Oh, the marble heart!—the cruel tigress!" she moaned, and cast herself on the ground in an agony of weeping.

She was aroused by a footfall, and started up, to find the Little Giant standing beside her with folded arms and a frown of anger on his brows.

"Oh, Joe!—don't! don't!" she pleaded, clasping his knees.

"How dared you?" he demanded, not offering to lift her up.

"I love you so! I love you so! *Don't kill me, Joe, by forsaking me for her! It will kill me if you do! I love you! I love you!*"

"Get up," he commanded.

The woman obeyed, standing before him like one awaiting the death sentence.

He took her chin in his hand and lifted her face to a penetrating scrutiny.

Her tear-swimming eyes, her pain-drawn face appealed to him. But he remained unmoved.

"How did you come to know what you have just told?" he asked.

"I learned it when I was a girl from her," was the tremulous reply.

"Who are you, anyway?" was the abrupt interrogatory.

The woman caught her breath and her heart ceased beating; but, not noticing this, he kept on:

"I have always been haunted by a resemblance in you to some one whom I must have known or seen in the past. Tell me—who were you?"

"No, Joe, you never saw me before," replied the woman, having somewhat regained her self-possession. "You may have heard her speak of me—her little cousin, Hatty."

"By Jove! I have. And Hally and Hatty are both from Harriet, of course."

"It is my family resemblance to her that has puzzled you, and I have often been afraid that you would find me out. You'll forgive me, Joe? I didn't want to pain you by recalling the past."

There was an absent look in his eyes. Instead of replying directly to her, he said:

"Go home. And, understand, there is to be no more of this."

"Yes, Joe."

She gazed at him as if hungering for some caress, even a look of softening—the slightest sign that she had not hopelessly offended him and alienated his love.

He offered none.

With a humility born only of the utter abandonment of love, she lifted his hand and kissed it deprecatingly, then turned and walked silently away.

"So," reflected the man when he was alone, "it is to save her cousin from her own unhappy fate that she has come back!"

But instead of softening him, this opposition made him more resolute, until he declared:

"I'll put this thing through, or bust!"

He had been walking with his eyes on the ground, in deep abstraction. When he came to this resolution, he raised his head and stepped out boldly, but stopped with a sudden chill. He had nearly run into a body hung across the road—the body of Tidy Tip! It bore the bloody marks of the Skeleton Avengers.

"My God! another?" he exclaimed with a shudder. "There are but three of us left! What is the connection between her coming and these mysterious skeletons? Are they supernatural after all? Am I reserved for the last? Bah! I will defy them all!"

Into the camp he went and roused the Vigilantes. When the body of Tidy Tip was exhibited to the crowd, it wrought them to a terrible pitch of fury.

All day long the worst element of Hell Hole had congregated in groups, talking in low, rumbling tones, and often turning glances of frowning hatred in the direction of the Palace Saloon—a feeling that was fostered by the rival saloon interests.

When Iron Despard appeared upon the street, perhaps a little paler, but in no other way showing any trace of the terrible affray of the night before, the fact was commented upon to this effect:

"Ye see, blood-lettin' don't hurt him none. He has ways an' means o' fillin' up ag'in!"

And now the worst construction was put upon the death of Tidy Tip, just at this time.

"Didn't I tell ye? Tidy Tip had to make good the blood that Bullwhacker Ben let out of him last night!"

"Boys," declared Dan the Devil, "thar's no two ways about it—he's one of 'em! You seen the fix Ben was in arter he got through with him. I leave it to any gent in the crowd, ef Tip's case hyar ain't a chaw of the same plug. We might as well douse his glim first as last. I move that we go fur him instanter!"

Growls of assent passed through the crowd, gradually swelling to yells, which in the end took the form of:

"Down with the vampire!"

The crowd surged madly and was on the point of breaking away to storm the Palace Saloon, when the Kid made himself heard.

"Hold on, gentlemen," he said, in his cool, off-hand way, while he held his cigarette daintily between finger and thumb. "I'm with you, in this matter, heart and soul; but let me suggest that what is done hastily is seldom done well. Admitting that Iron Despard is a vampire, does it occur to you that vampires don't pass in their checks after ordinary methods? Suppose this one chooses to vanish in a cloud of smoke, just when you think the pins are all up to give him the grand bounce? What do you propose to do about it?"

What indeed? Here was a dilemma which took everybody by surprise. The men stood agog, gazing blankly into one another's faces.

"Now," pursued the Kid, as indifferently as if he were arranging the most trivial thing in the world, "I have a plan."

"Spit 'er out, boss!" cried a burly fellow. "Ef you see a way cl'ar to flax him, we'll back ye, every man Jack of us!"

"I have a fancy," pursued the Kid, blowing a thin wreath of smoke into the air, "to pitch my luck against his. You see, a vampire can always kill himself, when any other man could 't touch one side of him. Now I propose to stand him three hands of draw, the one who comes out second best to pass in his checks in any way most agreeable to himself."

Those who heard this remarkable speech stood dumb with astonishment. Then considering the coolness with which it had been made, the Kid returning nonchalantly to the enjoyment of his cigarette, the man who had guaranteed the support of the crowd, in anticipation of the Kid's project, said:

"That's a purty good joke, as jokes go; but this hyar ain't the time o' day fur no doggone foolishness."

"Joke!" replied the Kid. "Do I ever joke?"

"But what in thunder's the sense o' this thing? What fur would you pit your life ag'in' his'n?"

"Oh, a whim of mine. I've played for all sorts of stakes in my time. Just now I've a notion to put up something that is worth while. If he's a better man than I am, I'll not squeal—you may bet on that."

"But, pardner, by all accounts, a vampire ought to be so's he could stock the keerds ag'in' the devil himself."

"If he can beat me at it he's welcome to try," replied the Kid.

Although he spoke so carelessly the men saw that he was really in earnest. There was something wildly exhilarating in the idea of such a game; so they fell in with it.

Instead of charging the Palace Saloon with a war-whoop, as they had purposed, they betook themselves thither in as orderly a manner as is usual with such men, the Kid modestly avoiding any conspicuousness of position.

CHAPTER IX.

THE THIRD DUEL.

IRON DESPARD'S wound was a comparatively slight one, in the arm, instead of in the side, as the spectators supposed. He had fainted from excessive excitement, his system being already taxed by illness.

Early in the day following his encounter with Bullwhacker Ben, Hoss Johnson came to him and said:

"Look a-hyar, pardner, I like you; an' when I take stock in a man, I'm bound to give him p'int, if I kin. Now, I reckon you're calculated to hoe your own row, as a rule; but a man that takes a contract to clean out a hull town is bound to get licked. Thar's some purty tough cusses in this hyar town, an' the hull gang is down on you. They're talkin' vampire; an' you know what that means as well as I do. The thing'll come to a head by night, if you hain't jumped the place. So I've come to say, if you and your lady wants places in the stage, I kin pick you up on the quiet a couple o' miles down the road."

"You are very kind," replied Iron Despard; "but I never yet was run out of any place. I propose to stand against all comers as long as I have a leg to stand on."

"But I hate to see a good man bowled out in this hyar way; an' they're bound to do it."

"Perhaps."

"Then you won't go?"

"Thanking you for your kindness—no."

Later in the day, after her meeting with Hally, Hortense Dangerfield sat in the living room of her home, while Iron Despard leaned with his elbow against the sash, looking dreamily out of the window.

Not raising her eyes from her sewing, she asked:

"Despard, have I contributed to your happiness during our association?"

He started out of his reverie, and going over to where she sat, began to stroke her hair fondly.

Under that silent caress the woman stopped her work, but did not look up. She sat rigid, not moving, scarcely breathing.

"What is it, my queen?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing—nothing—a woman's whim," she replied. "But—you haven't answered me."

After a pause, he said, simply:—

"Yes."

She went on with her sewing, very quietly, feeling that his eyes rested upon her speculatively, though he did not question her further. Perhaps he believed that, as she said, it was merely a passing whim.

When he left the room, she abruptly dropped her work, leaned back in her chair with closed eyes, and sat perfectly still for a long time, while her face grew paler and paler, until suddenly she started to her feet with a low, intense cry:—

"My God!"

For a time she moved aimlessly about the room, alternately clinching her hands and dashing the hair back from her damp forehead. The fever, whatever its cause, finally burnt itself out; and her wonted haughty calm returned.

She showed no trace of agitation when, that evening, the Kid presented himself, followed by men whose hostility to Iron Despard was well known.

"I have the honor of addressing Mr. Despard Dangerfield?" he asked, courteously, of the gambler prince.

"That is my name, sir," was the cool reply, Iron Despard instinctively feeling that this was preliminary to a challenge.

"I am George Gordon, perhaps better known as the Kid."

"I have heard of you. How can I serve you?"

"I have come to serve you."

"Ah!"

"In this way. You know, of course, that your road, thus far, in this town, hasn't been a very smooth one."

"I have no reason to complain," interposed the gambler prince, indifferently.

"No," smiled the Kid, ready enough to see the point. "But things are getting no better fast. The fact is, this camp has made up its mind that it has no use for you. I don't say that a compromise could be effected. I take it that you're not the man to be backed down—"

"Hardly!"

"And then, perhaps, things have gone so far that the boys wouldn't listen to it. I needn't tell you that you rather hold over some of our old citizens in the same line of trade; and a man's pocket is his god. Then, Ten-strike Tom and Bullwhacker Ben were good men in their way, and bound to have their crowd. I reckon these are the parties that are bound to get square with you. They yell 'vampire,' and in this camp, just now, it's a deuced ugly cry. I tell you, frankly, I don't take any stock in it; and that's why I am here with the proposition I intend to make."

"What proposition?"

"Well, I don't like to see a gentleman trampled out like a hog; so I propose to give you a chance for something better. I'll play you three hands of draw; and the man who loses snuffs his own candle in the way he thinks most becoming a gentleman."

Deftly rolling a new cigarette in his left hand, (a connoisseur would be ashamed to have to use more than one hand for this purpose) the Kid coolly waited for Iron Despard's reply.

"But, one moment," said the gambler prince.

"You have no personal hostility toward me?"

"On the contrary, I am trying to do you a friendly turn, as one gentleman serving another."

"But if you win, what do you gain?"

"The satisfaction of knowing that I did not leave one of my own caste to be trampled in the mud—*par la canaille*," he said, speaking in French, so that the men of Hell Hole might not know that he was calling them "the rabble" to their face.

"And if you lose?"

The kid shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall have done the best I could for you."

"And do you mean to say that in that event you would take your own life?"

"Certainly."

"I thank you for your kind intentions; but I decline to play with you on such unequal terms."

"Oh, but you must!"

"Must?"

"I have told the boys that I meant to play you; and I never go back on my word."

"But do you suppose I would accept safety from any man, by exposing him to a gratuitous risk?"

"Don't misunderstand the situation. There is no safety for you any way—only a choice of how you shall pass in your checks. If the fickle jade sends me up the flume, you will be just where you are without my interference. The boys will bounce you rough-shod."

"In any event, you are taking this hazard

upon yourself without cause. I am ready to meet foes, without involving friends."

"Look here, my dear sir, don't force me to insult you; for I assure you that I have held you in highest esteem, ever since I saw your metal. This is the way I look at the matter: the honor of gentlemen is assailed; we, as gentlemen, are equally bound to defend it; I never shirked a responsibility in honor in my life. There you have it in a nutshell. That's the reason this thing must go through, even if I have to insult you to bring it on."

Iron Despard extended his hand, cordially.

"There shall be nothing but friendship between us," he said. "I wish that I could dissuade you from this; but I think that I appreciate your feelings, which make it impossible. You will believe me when I say that, from the bottom of my heart, I hope you will win."

"I do. But I trust to your honor to play your best against me, as I shall against you."

"Certainly."

Then the strange contestants, the warmest friends, yet each playing against the other's life, placed themselves at a table, where they were surrounded by absorbed lookers-on, many of whom instantly made side-bets.

The deal fell to Iron Despard—a matter of no advantage in the game they were playing. After discarding and refilling their hands, the Kid showed a small pair.

"Thar!" growled one of the spectators. "That's fur playing a vampire. The Kid's booked!"

But, upon being shown, Iron Despard's hand contained nothing.

The Kid had won the first hand.

"I congratulate you," said the gambler prince. "Your chance is now much better than mine."

"A game's never played out until the last card's turned," replied the Kid.

In the second hand Iron Despard showed three of a kind, the Kid two pairs.

Now the interest centered in the last hand. The showing of the cards decided a life!

The Kid discarded two cards, Iron Despard four!

A murmur of delight ran through the crowd.

"By Judas! we'll fotch the critur', vampire or no vampire! Thar's three of a kind on our side, fur rocks!"

Iron Despard did not look at the four cards he drew. Nothing was to be gained by it. He would know their value soon enough.

The Kid displayed his cards. A shout—a cheer—a yell!

"A full hand, by all that's lovely!"

"Three aces and two kings! Hooray! The devil himself can't beat that!"

"Good boy, Gordon! The Kid forever!"

"I can't say I'm sorry for you," said the Kid. "It gives you the gentlemanly opening that I came here to offer you—unless, indeed, you can make a better showing."

"It isn't probable," said Iron Despard with no show of emotion.

Then, with a careless hand, he proceeded to toss his cards over one at a time.

The deuce of hearts came first.

"A bad lead-off," commented one of the on-lookers.

The deuce of clubs.

"Blast his little pair!"

The deuce of diamonds.

"Thunder an' lightnin'! he's got three of a kind!"

"But he'll want 'em, an' more."

The ace of hearts.

"Hooray! Aces no more!"

"That settles her!"

"Johnny, fork over my leetle ounce!"

There was a confused babel of comments. But suddenly a deathlike hush fell.

The last card turned by Iron Despard was the deuce of spades!

It was the voice of the Kid that broke the stillness.

"Now I am sorry for you," he said, tossing away his cigarette. "Your four of a kind plays the very deuce with my full hand."

And he laughed lightly.

But a groan of remonstrance went through the crowd.

Iron Despard rose and held up his hand to silence the crowd.

"Men of Hell Hole," he said, "I want you to unite with me in absolving this brave gentleman from the stipulations of this unnatural game. You have nothing against him, nor have I. If any one is to die, I am the man."

Although the crowd manifested their concurrence in this, the Kid demurred.

"Gentlemen, you don't know me. I played

for a certain stake. I lost. I never back out of anything that is square."

Expostulations were vain, though many of the Kid's friends joined with Iron Despard in a direct appeal.

"A gentleman never goes back on his word," was his ultimatum. "It's the easiest way to step down and out. This little tube placed between the teeth—thus. A touch on the trigger—thus—"

Crack!

A convulsive shudder—the pistol fell from his nerveless grasp—his head sunk upon his breast. Propped in the angle formed by the back of his chair and the wall, the Kid sat, a corpse!

A moment of deathlike stillness. Then began a murmur which swelled to a clamor, a shout, a yell:

"Down with the vampire!"

CHAPTER X.

THE FOURTH DUEL.

BUT there came an interruption. A stentorian voice shouted:

"Hold on, boys! Give me a show."

No-likee-John interposed between Iron Despard and the enraged mob.

When he could make himself heard, he explained his purpose.

"Ten-strike Tom tried this fancy sharp on pistols, an' got plugged. Bullwhacker Ben crossed knives with him, an' got one tucked up under his jacket. The Kid pitted his luck ag'in' the critter, an' he got scooped. Now I want to tackle him on el'ar muscle! Ef he kin git away with me, I want to know it."

Here was a chance for more "fun," and of a novel sort. Feeling sure of their man in the end, the crowd was willing to defer their final disposition so as to make room for any little "side mills."

Iron Despard smiled sardonically.

"It seems that I shall never earn my citizenship in this town, until I kill you all off, one by one," he said.

"That's so, boss," was the hearty indorsement of Moll Pritchard's Right Bower.

"What conditions do you propose?" asked the gambler of No-likee-John.

"Nature's weapons, and no rules to bother. Ketch as ketch kin. Ef you throw me, jump on me an' nammer the devil out of me, an' I'll do the same fur you."

"To the death?" asked Iron Despard.

"Waal," replied No-likee-John, "when I git through with ye, I reckon the boys won't have no work on their hands—less it is to bury ye."

"Gentlemen," said Iron Despard, turning to the crowd, "after I have killed a dozen or so of the best men you can bring on, don't you think that you ought to let up on me?"

It was an ugly question. In spite of their prejudice they could but see its justice. But the thought that he might be a vampire silenced every sentiment of fair play. Only scowling looks answered him.

"Very well," he replied, "we'll discuss that after I have got this gentleman out of his worry. Meanwhile, as I may be killed, I presume there will be no objection to my taking leave of my wife."

He strode toward the door of the gambling-hall, and though no one cared to interpose directly, more than one drew a revolver and stood in readiness to frustrate any attempt to escape.

Not appearing to notice them, Iron Despard stepped up to the Queen of the Green Cloth, who all this while had retained her position waiting for patrons, and after whispering a few words, kissed her on the lips.

"Now, gentlemen!" he said, briskly; and all passed into the street.

Having thrown his hat on the ground and drawn his shirt over his head, No-likee-John was ready for the contest. His great breadth of shoulders, depth of chest and length of arm, and the remarkable muscular development of the man, now showed to advantage.

"Be the powers!" declared Foxy. "Wanst in his grip, and he has the hug of a grizzly in the two arms av 'um!"

Iron Despard did not remove his shirt, though every man in the crowd waited eagerly to compare him with his antagonist.

It was understood that this fight was to be hampered by none of the rules of the prize-ring. Aside from the stipulation that no weapon or missile of any kind was to be used, the contestants were perfectly free.

As they stood face to face, Iron Despard was the taller, No-likee-John the heavier.

For a time they moved cautiously about each other, watching their chance.

Presently Iron Despard began to advance, No-likee-John as guardedly retreating, but gathering himself for a spring.

All of a sudden he shot forward like a thunderbolt, but was met by a buffet which sent him reeling back.

Iron Despard did not seem to care about following up his advantage. He smiled disdainfully at the groan of hatred that went up from the crowd.

No-likee-John advanced again, cool, but with a look of murderous determination in his eyes.

"Clinch him, Jack. He'll knock the stuffin' out o' ye, on the spar," was the advice of an anti-Despard man.

This suggestion was needless, since No-likee-John had thought of no other plan of fighting from the start.

He thought he saw his chance when Iron Despard dropped his guard. A rush; and he grasped the empty air.

Instead of striking him as before, Iron Despard suddenly sunk, as if into the ground.

But the next instant No-likee-John felt a head thrust between his legs, and himself lifted and hurled through the air.

Turning a complete somersault, he struck the ground on his back and shoulders, with a concussion that knocked the breath out of his body.

The crowd surged and yelled, glaring at Iron Despard vengefully.

Again the gambler prince disdained to improve a just advantage, but stood with folded arms, waiting for his foe to "toe the scratch" once more.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you see that this man is no match for me—"

"Thru' fur the devil! Sure, nothing human will stand agen 'um!" declared an Irishman.

"I have no desire to take his life," pursued Iron Despard, not heeding the muttered interruption. "I therefore propose that we throw up this contest, before any more damage is done."

But No-likee-John was himself the first to oppose this, not waiting for an expression of opinion from his backers.

"Never!" he cried, grinding the word between his teeth. "Once let me git my paws on ye, an' I'll show ye a trick!"

Iron Despard knew that herein lay his danger. Those bony fingers were like clamps of steel.

No-likee-John advanced champing his teeth and working his hands, as if they itched to clutch and tear his adversary.

Now the fight was renewed in deadly earnest. In eluding the clutch of his foe Iron Despard was as light on his feet as a panther. Now and then, as opportunity offered, he stood his ground, and delivered a lightning blow straight from the shoulder.

The crowd was wild with excitement, many of No-likee-John's friends showing a disposition to aid him by getting in the way of Iron Despard's movements.

The gambler prince saw that the fight must be brought to a close very soon, if he did not wish to become the victim of foul play.

The thought of the unfairness to which he had been subjected from the very start, and that, even if he vanquished his foe, he was to be mobbed, maddened him, and brought that fierceness which had won him the title of the Demon Duelist.

Two swift blows hurled No-likee-John back, dazed. Then Iron Despard rushed upon him, leaped into the air, and shot out both feet, striking him in the breast and dashing him to the ground with tremendous violence.

"Good God! he's killed him!" shouted one of the crowd.

But now that strange mania of rage was upon Iron Despard in full force.

He sprung upon his fallen adversary, seizing him by the feet. Then, by the exertion of Herculean strength of which his build gave no promise, he began to whirl round and round with him, the disproportionate weight of his victim being so great that his head swept round its circuits not more than a foot from the ground.

The strangeness of this unexpected move left the crowd inactive with wonder. They made way before the madman, as he swept from the middle of the street toward the sidewalk.

The next instant a universal wail of horror went up, as No-likee-John's head was dashed against a hitching post.

In one of those unreasoning panics which seize a crowd, those nearest the spot rushed away in every direction. The space to the door of his saloon was thus left free. Iron Despard availed himself of this opportunity;

and the door closed upon his vanishing figure before the crowd recovered itself.

Then rose yells of vengeance; and the mob hurled itself against the door *en masse*. What was the surprise to find that this was as firm as a rock! Now they discovered, moreover, that oak shutters had made their appearance at the inside of the windows. Under their very noses the Palace Saloon had been suddenly converted into a bullet proof fortress. That then was the secret of Iron Despard's pretended leave-taking of the Queen of the Green Cloth!

"Begorra! the devil has outwitted us!" whispered Foxy, to the Little Giant.

"On the contrary," was the well-satisfied reply, as the speaker listened to the cry of "vampire," on every lip, "if he had consulted me, he couldn't have pleased me better. Now we've got him!"

It looked as if his words were not without foundation; for the furious mob was raining bullets against the house. Glass enough was shattered; but the oak shutters defied pistol assault.

"But what air we standin' 'yar fur, doin' nothin'?" cried Moll Pritchard's Right Bower. "What's wantin' is a batterin'-ram."

"A batterin'-ram! a batterin'-ram!" yelled the crowd.

In that country such a requirement was not long in forthcoming. Sixty seconds after the demand was made a couple of axes were ringing in alternate blows; and soon there was a swish through the air, followed by the concussion of a tree striking the ground. Rapid blows severed the top with its few branches; and the engine of war was ready.

"Hold on, boys; we don't want the hull raft of yel!" shouted Moll Pritchard's Right Bower, as the mob jostled each other in their eagerness to have a hand on the battering-ram.

By a great deal of profanity and some backing of authority by physical force, he selected his men.

"Now, charge!" he commanded.

With a yell they set out.

Crack! crack! crack! crack! crack! crack!

From somewhere within the house came the ringing reports in rapid succession. They must have been fired through some aperture prepared for such an emergency. No smoke appeared on the outside to indicate the position of the marksman. The execution done, however, proved him a master.

Six men tumbled headlong, and dropping the ram long before it reached the door the rest fled in every direction, with yells of terror.

That was a protest which spoke louder than words. The six men, among whom the first to fall was the redoubtable Moll Pritchard's Right Bower, lay as if dead.

Hell Hole raged—out of pistol-range!

"We'll have to wait until after dark, boys; and then we'll burn him out of his rat-hole," cried one. But feeling the need of a new leader, he went on:—"Whar's the Leetle Giant?"

But Joe Smedley was nowhere to be found. The Queen of the Green Cloth must not see him an active participant in the measures against Iron Despard's life, however much she might suspect that they were urged forward at his instigation.

Before night, all of the six shot from the battering-ram revived and crept away, when it was found that they had been "creased," the bullets having only grazed their skulls. But this evident willingness on the part of Iron Despard to spare their lives while protecting his own, did not prevent the piling of combustibles against his house, as soon as the darkness afforded a cover. The match was then applied and the incendiary beat a hasty retreat; but not a sound was heard from those within the house.

Up the walls, along the eaves and over the roof crept the serpent-tongued flames, curling in eddying clouds of black smoke against the face of the cliff before which the house was built.

Just beyond pistol-range, the mob formed a yelling, hooting semicircle, waiting with weapons in readiness for the expected rush of the vampire from his burning house. But he did not come forth.

"I tell ye what it is, boys," declared Moll Pritchard's Right Bower, "them vampires is all salamanders. Now I allow, he jest smiles at fire."

But at this moment a man came rushing toward the spot, with every mark of strong excitement. Joe Smedley had just been informed of the fire; but he was too late to save the Queen of the Green Cloth, if she was yet in that burning building.

Before he could make inquiry, he heard a general cry of amazement, and beheld a spectacle which chained him to the spot.

Behind the veil of smoke which rose from the burning building was seen the figure of a woman ascending the perpendicular face of the cliff—not by climbing, which would have been impossible, but by floating, as if borne aloft by some supernatural agency.

"Good God! it's the ghost of the Queen of the Green Cloth!" cried Moll Pritchard's Right Bower, in an awed voice; and this was the generally accepted theory.

But to the Little Giant, staring like a man turned to stone, this strange spectacle had a different significance. He recognized the siren who had twice before warned him to desist from his plot. Now her eyes were fixed upon him threateningly.

Up the cliff she rose, to disappear over its verge.

The mob stood gazing at the spot where she had vanished, every man dumfounded.

Then Dan the Devil appeared, with excited words of instruction and exhortation, as he rushed from point to point among the crowd. Every one who heard him set up a yell of rage.

Then came hurried orders, restraining the crowd from rushing off in a body. Some were directed to remain where they were, some detailed to follow leaders who rushed off into the night with every indication of pressing emergency.

CHAPTER XI.

THE AVENGERS AT HOME.

BUT Iron Despard was not in the burning house.

He had made a brave fight up to the point where further defiance would be mere foolhardiness. Then, knowing—none better than he—that one man cannot fight a whole community, he had retreated through an avenue prepared beforehand.

Until nightfall he defended his beleaguered house. Then, having secured his valuables in a grip-sack, he went into a back room and reached up into what appeared to be the chimney of an ordinary open fireplace. A moment later he slid the whole back of the fireplace upward, disclosing the black mouth of a cave.

This he entered, followed by the Queen of the Green Cloth, lighting his way with a common lantern.

When the back of the fireplace had been slid back to place, they found themselves in almost utter darkness, the faint rays of the lantern illuminating only a short radius around them.

The passage was tortuous, with irregular sides and roof, now narrowing to a mere crevice, now widening to a chamber. From these chambers ramified other corridors, among which Iron Despard seemed to have no difficulty in making choice.

It was at the *debouchure* into one of these caverns that the Queen of the Green Cloth caught her guide's arm with a startled whisper:

"Despard!—some one is coming."

"One of our men coming to meet us. They've got anxious."

"Heavens!—look!"

He did look as greatly astonished, almost as much startled, as she.

From a black opening, almost opposite them, issued a creature of unearthly guise. The strangeness of her aspect lay in the fact that she seemed self-luminous with a pale, ghostly radiance.

This of itself lighted her path, since she carried no torch or lantern.

She seemed to float rather than walk, her flowing draperies giving forth no rustle.

She was very beautiful, with flowing blonde hair and great, sad eyes that took no notice of Iron Despard and the Queen of the Green Cloth.

It was the being who had twice appalled Joe Smedley, and was once more to appear to him, rising out of the smoke of Iron Despard's burning saloon.

At sight of this strange apparition even the iron nerves of the gambler prince felt a shiver run through them.

For the first time in his experience of her, the Queen of the Green Cloth betrayed fear.

Entering from one corridor, the specter crossed the cavern and disappeared in another.

"What was it?" asked the Queen of the Green Cloth, with a shiver.

But, before Iron Despard could draw breath to answer, a slight crash of glass was followed by the extinction of his light.

Instantly he dropped the now useless lantern and drew a revolver.

The Queen of the Green Cloth seemed com-

pletely unmoved. She, who never betrayed fear, now uttered a cry of alarm, and clung to her protector's arm.

The next instant an intense dazzling light sprung up directly in front of Iron Despard. Although it blinded him so that he could see no object, he fired, aiming directly below it on a line with a man's breast.

The light disappeared, not by reason of its own extinction, but because his head was enveloped in the folds of some cloth thrown over it.

The next instant, with the cries of the Queen of the Green Cloth sounding rattled to his ears, he was borne to the ground, struggling like a madman. Despite his efforts, however, he was overcome, bound and disarmed; but, though half suffocated by the enveloping blanket, he realized that no further violence had been offered him.

The muffler was removed, and he lay in deep darkness and silence.

What was the meaning of this capture? Where was the Queen of the Green Cloth?

Iron Despard was a man who never lost presence of mind, nor wasted his energies. When he could not help himself, he was content to wait.

He was not kept long in suspense. As if by magic, out of the black darkness suddenly sprung a band of luminous skeletons—the same who had ridden through Hell Hole with Jim Kane in their midst.

Like most if not all professional gamblers, Iron Despard was in a certain sense a fatalist; but his superior intelligence raised him above vulgar superstitions. He believed that these were masked men. At the same time, he believed that he was to be their next victim.

"Iron Despard," said a hollow voice, "arise and stand before the Skeleton Avengers of Crime!"

Two shadowy figures, dressed in deep black, so that he had not discovered them before, though they stood on either side of him, now bent and lifted him to his feet.

"Well, gentlemen," said the undaunted gambler prince, "if you will allow me a suggestion, it will be that the sooner you drop all mummery and come to the point, the sooner you will gain your object, whatever it is. You will find me a very accommodating man to deal with. But my time is valuable, and I presume yours is."

"Who or what we are—whether gentlemen or otherwise—it matters not," replied the same solemn voice. But considering our relative positions, it will be at least becoming in you to attend our pleasure, both as to time and methods."

"Yes; I'll admit that—you've got me fast enough. But now, what do you want with me?"

"Unbind the prisoner," commanded the chief of the Skeleton Avengers, ignoring his question.

"Thank you for so much," said Iron Despard, standing now at his ease. "Of course I'm not fool enough to attempt to escape, surrounded as I am—unless, indeed, you are fools enough to show me the ghost of a chance!"

"Iron Despard, the Skeleton Avengers have no charge to prefer against you personally—"

"That's one comfort!"

"But you hold a secret—"

"Which you may bet high I will stick to, if it is of any importance. What secret?"

"After his capture, the man known as Patent-leather Joe, afterwards as Captain Arizona, still later as Captain Mask, managed to convey to you the secret of a hidden cache of his ill-gotten gains."

"How do you know he did?"

"Listen! This was to remain undisturbed until you were assured of his death, either by process of law, which then hung over him, or otherwise. In that event, you were to unearth the treasure, and divide it into two equal parts; one part to go to his sister, Hortense, your wife, thus rewarding you indirectly for your discharge of the trust; and the other to be given to a person named by the testator."

"Well, now," said Iron Despard, in a bantering tone, "where did you gain so much information?"

"It matters not," replied the chief of the Skeleton Avengers. "Enough that it is true."

"But what are you going to do about it?"

"In the interests of justice it is necessary that that treasure should be found—"

"Then why don't you go ahead and find it?"

"One-half of it will suffice to right a wrong that lies at Patent-leather Joe's door. We therefore offer you the half which was to go to your wife, in consideration—"

"Hold on, you infernal coward! You have

got far enough. Backed by your crowd of scoundrels, you have dared to insult an unarmed and unsupported man. Now pick out your best man, and let me meet the two of you in a fair fight. I'll ram your bribe down your throat!"

Iron Despard's eyes blazed. The Demon Duelist looked equal to his challenge.

The chief of the Skeleton Avengers seemed wholly unmoved by this defiance.

"In consideration," he pursued calmly, "of your putting us in possession of the other half."

"Which I swear never to do."

"It will be well for you to consider before making any rash resolve. What you are giving up is but money, at most. What we give you in return is life."

"Excuse me. What I would be giving up is honor, a thing which it is no doubt characteristic in you to entirely overlook."

"If you choose, you can give the half coming to your wife to the other legatee. Your life is certainly worth a ransom."

"But Patent-leather Joe not yet being dead, to my knowledge, I have no right to either half."

"I have no time or disposition to debate nice points," said the chief of the Skeleton Avengers impatiently. "At any rate, you realize that you are entirely at our mercy; and you have seen our way of arguing with men whom we are forced to consider our enemies—instance the case of Jim Kane, and later Tidy Tip."

"Yes," replied Iron Despard; "I know your devilishness, to my cost. I believe I have the honor to be classed with you by the men of the Hell Hole. How true it is, you of course know."

"That is not to the purpose," said the chief of the Skeleton Avengers. "Do you refuse to tell us where the money and dust is hidden?"

"I do."

The chief waved his hand.

Iron Despard was instantly seized and slip-knots passed over his wrists.

"We give you an opportunity to reconsider your determination," said the chief.

"Such a scoundrel as you cannot understand that such a question presents no chance of debate to a man of honor," replied Iron Despard.

Again the chief waved his hand.

The lariats were drawn taut, and Iron Despard lifted clear of the ground. Then the Skeleton Avengers closed in about him in a circle, throwing the light of their ghostly torches upon him, and threatening him with their strange javelins.

"For the third time," said the chief, sternly, "will you reveal the secret?"

"Never!"

"On your life, I conjure you!"

"Do your worst."

A wave of the hand, and—

Iron Despard was lowered to the ground, the luminous skeletons retreating to their places.

His shadowy attendants then released his wrists from the lariats, the pressure of which had become somewhat painful; and he stood once more free.

"Iron Despard," said the chief, "you are a brave man."

"Because your mummeries had no effect upon me?"

"Whatever you may think of the mummeries, I believe that you did not fail to appreciate the death that threatened you; and you faced it without blenching. Moreover, you are trustworthy. Not every man would keep his word in another's interests, at the cost of life. Now we want such men as you. What do you say to joining us?"

"No, thanks."

"One suggestion before you decide. You are in trouble. We will make common cause against our enemies."

"Thank you; I can fight my own battle."

"I see that you are laboring under a misapprehension," said the chief of the Skeleton Avengers. "At least let us part friends."

Dropping his black mantle from his shoulders, he advanced toward his prisoner.

As he approached, a change came over Iron Despard. He began to stare hard, betraying marked signs of astonishment, bewilderment, awe.

He could see objects beyond, between the luminous ribs, and close on either side of the spinal column! He had believed these but clever maskers. Now he knew that, unless he was asleep and dreaming, unless he was losing his senses, the object that was approaching him was a veritable skeleton!

The wonderful being stopped before him, and extended its hand, saying:

"Will you not shake hands with me, Danger-field?"

That hollow voice seemed to come from its cavernous chest. There was an unearthly grin on its fleshless face as it waited.

Iron Despard rubbed his eyes and stared. He was moved by a feeling that had never before found place in his breast. As if fascinated he extended his hand.

He grasped unmistakable bones! It was a skeleton!

The touch of that hand sent an indescribable chill to the iron heart of the gambler prince. Shuddering, he dropped it.

The skeleton retreated to its place in the weird circle.

Iron Despard gazed round upon them. A sudden desperation seized him.

"By Heaven! I will know whether this is a fraud!" he cried.

And madly he rushed after the thing that, being but fleshless bones, walked and talked like a living man.

But a score of lances were opposed to his breast. He was forced to desist.

"Go in peace!" said the chief, as one of his followers cast his mantle once more on his shoulders.

His shadowy attendants thrust Iron Despard's revolvers into their holsters and his bowie into its sheath, and stepped back beyond the circle of skeletons.

"Go in peace!" once more said the hollow voice of the chief; and from all round the circle came a dismal echo:

"Go in peace!"

At this moment a woman's voice cried:

"Despard! Despard!"

The gambler prince turned, and saw a break in the circle of skeletons opposite the yawning mouth of a corridor, in which stood the Queen of the Green Cloth, wild-eyed and trembling.

The skeletons all pointed their javelins in that direction.

Iron Despard joined his frightened wife, and supported her down the corridor.

As they came to the next chamber, they found all the corridors leading from it, save one, occupied by skeletons, who indicated this unobstructed corridor with their spears, standing in perfect silence.

So the way was pointed out until the gambler prince emerged from the cave in a valley cut off from Hell Hole by towering cliffs.

Here he found saddle-horses and attendants, evidently prepared for flight.

But just as he was about to mount, after a few hasty words of direction, the crags rung with yells and a fusillade of pistol-shots; there was a short fierce struggle; and Iron Despard was a prisoner in the hands of Moll Pritchard's Right Bower and the men of Hell Hole.

CHAPTER XII.

NECK IN HALTER!

It had struck the Little Giant that Iron Despard might have had an object in buying the Hole-in-the-hill claim as a site for his saloon; and he had dispatched Dan the Devil and Foxy to reconnoiter the other side of the cliff, with the result of discovering the gambler prince's back door. Having become separated from his companion, Dan the Devil returned alone to report his success.

We have seen that a detachment under Moll Pritchard's Right Bower hurried to intercept the flight of the supposed vampire.

But on their way they suddenly came to a standstill with cries of dismay. Over the road swung a ghastly object.

"My God! here's more work of them devils! Who is it, this time? Strike a match, some one; and let's git a squint at his face."

The match was struck.

Its flickering blaze illuminated the distorted face of Foxy. Like his predecessors, he was shockingly mutilated, and stone dead.

"Boys, it's a warnin'! I move we go back."

"Thar's no luck chasin' after vampires, no-how."

"Pard, that's about the size of my divvy."

"Hold on, hyar, boys!" shouted Moll Pritchard's Right Bower, seeing his men about to back out of the enterprise. "We've made the mistake of goin' fur the galoot one at a time. Now, ef we jump on him all at once, we'll down him, sure. Ef we git him, we've got the king-pin. Ef we let him shake us now, he'll prow around until he runs us all out of town. Them that's afraid kin stay. Them that's got the sand foler me. Forward march!"

He dashed ahead, and catching the infection, the rest followed.

Dan the Devil was struck speechless with fear at the sight of the fate of his late comrade. He could but stare, shivering. When the mob suddenly leaped after their leader, his blunted faculties did not take in all at once the fact that he was being left alone.

It came upon him with an agonizing thrill of horror; and he was in the act of bounding after them, when he heard something whistling through the air. The next instant he was thrown violently to the ground, feeling the noose of a lariat grip his arms and breast.

Before he could regain the breath which was thus partially knocked out of him, to scream forth the frenzy of fear that was upon him, there came the rush of hurrying feet close at hand, and a blanket enveloped him in its smothering folds.

His late companions rushed off in the darkness, never missing him.

They were just in time to catch Iron Despard in the act of making his escape. More than one of their number lay dead or wounded before they overpowered him, but at last he sat astride his horse, his legs tied under the animal's belly and his hands securely bound behind his back, while a running noose at the end of a long rope was about his neck, the other end being in the hands of the victorious mob.

So was led captive the redoubtable Iron Despard.

But in the way was an obstruction. Dan, the Devil, hung beside Foxy!

That sight wrought the crowd to frenzy.

"Swing this devil here!" they yelled, "beside the boys his crowd has hung up to dry!"

And only thunders of profanity and even some knock-down arguments on the part of the leaders prevented the enraged mob from tearing their prisoner limb from limb.

Dan the Devil and Foxy were taken down and borne in advance.

As thus the procession approached the camp, making the night hideous with their vindictive yells, the uproar called others out to meet them, who fell into the jostling ranks and added their clamor to the rest.

Entering the camp, whose one street was brilliantly lighted by the lurid glare of Iron Despard's burning saloon, they found women whose white lips contrasted strangely with the unchanging bloom of their painted cheeks, cowering in breathless groups before the various dance-houses. How with the glitter of fear the eyes of these shivering wretches rested upon that madly-surg-ing, wildly-gesticulating, loudly-swear-ing mob, as upon a rout of wild beasts broken loose. And some looked pityingly upon the man whose name was loaded with execration, whose blood was demanded by every tongue.

On through the camp they bore, to halt before the blazing ruins of the Palace Saloon, beneath a red-wood tree, over one of whose branches the rope was quickly run.

And Iron Despard?

Do you think that he trembled with fear, that his lips were livid, that his eyes were distended and rolling with that terror which the dread presence of death so often inspires?

No!

Like a Grecian god he sat upon his restless steed!—pale, I grant you, but not shaken in that iron courage which no vicissitude of his checkered life had ever yet daunted.

Calmly he sat, with head proudly erect, lips firm, and his clear, cold eye ranging with contemptuous indifference over that surging mob.

Their rude dress and the murderous weapons which they flourished with such fierce recklessness—their harsh visages, brutalized with dissipation and inflamed with passion, and half-hidden amid their bushy, unkempt beards—their gleaming, bloodshot eyes, their menacing gestures, and their yells of rage, all conspired to make them seem like a horde of demons.

"Cut the black heart out of his body! Hang-in's too good fur him!" roared one burly ruffian, elbowing his way through the crowd, bowie-knife in hand.

"Right fur you, pard!—he's got the blood of a dozen men on him!"

"He's only a beginnin'! Thar's more that's got to go up the same tree!"

"I back you thar, boss! We've stood this sort o' thing long enough. Let's make an example o' this one."

"A little scalpin' an' burnin' wouldn't be more'n he deserves!"

A wild yell of approval went up from a score of throats.

Living among savages, these men had caught some of their spirit of fiendish cruelty.

"Snake him down out o' that, an' we'll burn

him an' flay him! Somethin's got to be done to learn his gang that we mean business!"

"That's so! This slaughterin' of honest men is about played out! Down with him!"

"Down with him! Down with him!" went the cry, passing from lip to lip.

Again was the iron-hearted gambler prince in danger of being torn to pieces.

But at this point it suited the purposes of Joe Smedley to interfere.

"Hold on, boys!" he shouted, elbowing his way through the crowd.

"The Leetle Giant! the Leetle Giant! C'ar the way, thar!" went up the shout.

And so potent was the influence of this man, that faces which had been distorted and black with hatred, lighted with a look of eager admiration.

He sprang upon a stump, and waved his arms to enjoin silence. After one ringing cheer, the clamor of many tongues ceased.

After this evidence of his power the Little Giant looked toward the Queen of the Green Cloth.

From the time of her capture she had sat her horse like a marble statue. Upon witnessing the homage shown by the crowd to their captain of Vigilantes, her eyelids drooped, until the long lashes almost brushed her cold, white cheeks.

So, avoiding his glance, she sat perfectly motionless, passionless, unreadable.

Joe Smedley bit his lip, with a feeling very nearly akin to anger against this statuesque beauty.

"She cares nothing for me—that's plain!" he mused, savagely. "But does she care for him, either? I believe she is utterly without a heart."

Turning he addressed the crowd:

"Boys, this is no sight for that lady. Take her away."

He shot another burning glance toward her. She was led away without looking at him. Her last glance was toward Iron Despard.

But such a glance! What did it signify? It puzzled Joe Smedley. It seemed remorseful in its tenderness.

Iron Despard took leave of her with a glance. He did not seem to be disappointed that she betrayed no ordinary womanly emotion. Indeed, he looked after her proudly.

But she was gone.

Then met the eyes of those two Titans, whose struggle had rent Hell Hole with strife and made her one street reek with human blood!

Iron Despard's had a sullen light of intelligence in them.

The Little Giant's were sneeringly defiant.

"Then you are at the bottom of this?" said the gambler prince.

"You are keen at divining," replied Joe Smedley, with a smile.

"And you have come forward now, to let me know your enmity before I passed out."

"Keno again, for you!"

"Why did you set others upon me, instead of facing me like a man, unless, indeed, you are the coward you appear to be?"

Still the Little Giant smiled, unmoved.

"That's my affair," he said. "It is enough for you to know that I chose to remove you from my path without directly raising my hand against you. As for your taunt, it cannot reach me. The men of Hell Hole know whether I dare meet you, if I chose to."

"One question more, if you please. How am I in your way? I never saw you until a week ago."

The Little Giant hesitated. Then, quickly bending forward, he whispered into Iron Despard's ear:

"You possess the woman I covet!"

Into that fierce whisper he threw all the savage disappointment of his failure to win a single glance of encouragement from the Queen of the Green Cloth.

Then, waving his hand to the mob, he shouted: "Boys, this is none of my funeral. Go ahead with your circus!"

And he leaped from the stump.

As he thus merged into the crowd, Iron Despard called after him:

"My death will avail you nothing. By fair means or foul, the goal will be as inaccessible to you as before. The fortress can protect itself."

But, at this point, the speech which was intelligible only to him to whom it was addressed, was drowned in the yell with which the mob, with Moll Pritchard's Right Bower at their head, again took possession.

"Stand from in front, thar!" shouted the would-be executioner, and the crowd parted, leaving a clear avenue before the horse.

The splendid animal, Iron Despard's own (the same that had borne him and his bride from the death-trap which saw the annihilation of Captain Mask's band), trembled with excitement, pawed the ground, tossed his head and snorted, while his blood-red nostrils dilated, and his fiery eyes rolled in their sockets. It required three men—one on either side and one immediately in front—to keep him in place.

"Stand ready!" shouted Moll Pritchard's Right Bower.

"Ready she am!" responded his assistants in one voice.

But at this moment, when those holding the horse were about to free it, and others at either flank were ready at the word of command to prod the animal with their bowies to goad it to that dash which would launch its master into eternity, the air was pierced by a succession of shrill screams, evidently from the throats of women.

The mob turned from its bloody work, and from lip to lip passed the ominous cry:

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

From a score of shanties in various parts of the camp rolled upward into the night dense volumes of black smoke, reddened by lurid flames.

The whole town was on fire.

Private interest coming uppermost, the crowd made a rush, each man toward his own shanty. Then rose a different cry. Down the road, on the wings of the wind, came the Skeleton Avengers!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST DUEL.

So this was the retaliation of the vampire band—they had set fire to the town, to revenge the burning of Iron Despard's saloon.

And now they were making their descent, perhaps to wipe out at one fell swoop all the enemies of the gambler prince. If they were all as terrible in battle as he, what earthly power could withstand them? None!

In wild panic the miners rushed away into the darkness, leaving their cabins to burn; for was not life more precious?

With scarcely a pause beneath the death-tree, the Skeleton Avengers swept through the burning camp. But Iron Despard was not the only one of mortal form who rode away with them.

Beside him rode the Queen of the Green Cloth; and further back was the Little Giant, in bonds.

As they rode onward, their shadows were cast before by the lurid glare of the burning camp. That night Hell Hole was wiped from the face of the earth.

The hoofs of the horses ridden by the three of undoubted humanity gave forth a sharp, metallic ring, as they struck sparks from the flinty way. Those of the spirit-steeds sounded dull and muffled.

Iron Despard, the Little Giant, and the Queen of the Green Cloth, no doubt all experienced strange sensations, feeling themselves in very questionable company.

This uneasiness was in no wise diminished, when, in the depths of the mountains, the cavalcade suddenly came to a halt, and the Skeleton Band vanished, leaving the astonished mortals in black darkness.

A moment later the Little Giant felt his bonds severed by invisible hands.

While he was yet wondering at this strange proceeding the canyon reverberated with a deafening crash, that was echoed and re-echoed from crag to crag, like thunder; and, as if out of the very heavens, shot downward a ball of fire, until it struck the top of a pine where it burned steadily, illuminating the whole place with almost the brightness of noonday.

A cry of astonishment and dismay escaped the Little Giant, as he made haste to use his eyes and look about him.

He, Iron Despard, and the Queen of the Green Cloth sat their horses near together; but there was no sign of the Skeleton Avengers who had brought them hither.

But in their place was company not less ghastly.

About in a circle hung the seven men whom the Skeleton Avengers had so terribly slain. One and all were suspended by the wrists, their clothes sodden with blood, their heads hanging upon their breasts, and that look of horror frozen upon their faces, just as they had been found one after another; while at four opposite points in the circle stood against trees the four men who had fallen in duel with Iron Despard.

On the ground, ranged suggestively side by side, were a pair of revolvers, a pair of bowie-knives, and a pair of rapiers.

The Little Giant shuddered, as he gazed around on his eleven dead companions. Of that band, linked by a deed far back in the past, he alone remained alive. Were these the actual bodies, disinterred, and brought to this place to confound him; or were they only apparitions conjured by some supernatural power?

He felt his flesh creep!

Turning, he looked upon Iron Despard. What manner of man was he?

"So this is your work?" he asked.

"No," replied the gambler prince. "I am as greatly surprised as you appear to be."

Then you or your agents did not kill these men, and then bring them here to unnerve me—if I understand the suggestion of these weapons?"—pointing to the revolvers, bowie-knives and rapiers.

"Three of these men came to their death by my hand, having forced duels upon me, as you know. One staked his life against mine, lost, and shot himself. Further than this, I know no more of this strange proceeding than you do?"

"And you are not one of this Skeleton Band?"

"Decidedly not."

"Then what does this all mean?"

"I might ask you the same question."

"One thing is certain," said the Little Giant, glaring about with a defiant frown. "These bodies were put here to daunt me. But I will prove that I have nerve equal to a severer test. Whatever the power at work here, I defy it!"

"Whether they be men or devils," said Iron Despard, "is a question for future investigation. Meanwhile, let us avail ourselves of that which lies nearest at hand. Friendly or adverse, they have at least anticipated our most immediate want. For that, due thanks."

Leaping from his horse, he examined the weapons which lay side by side on the ground.

"These are of unquestionable excellence, each of its kind," he said. "There is nothing to do but to make a selection. Come, sir!—we are of one mind, I think."

Not to be tardy in accepting this challenge, the Little Giant swung his leg over the pommel of his saddle and leaped lightly to the ground.

"The question how these came here so opportunely, will interest but one of us," he said, significantly.

While examining the weapons in his turn he thought rapidly. Iron Despard had proved himself a dead shot with the revolver and irresistible with the bowie-knife. He, Joe Smedley, had learned to fence in the Mexican service, whither his adventuresome life had carried him. He was somewhat out of practice; but Iron Despard might know next to nothing about the rapier. A slight familiarity with the foils is the most an American is likely to be able to boast. Here, then, was his chance.

"Here as an opportunity to vary the monotony of Western dueling," he said, "let us try the rapier."

He spoke in an off-hand, matter-of-course way, though he knew that he was outraging the spirit of the code as understood in the West, where the choice of weapons is practically limited to the revolver and bowie-knife, not one man in a thousand being supposed to know anything about the use of a sword.

Iron Despard "dropped to this little game," but he smiled quietly. He had crossed swords with the students at Heidelberg, and had been pointed out in Paris as the man in whom the terrible Count Ugo had met his match.

As the Little Giant presented the sword-hilts, he took one at random.

Meanwhile the Queen of the Green Cloth sat her horse without a word or a sign of emotion. Iron Despard had avoided looking at her. The Little Giant, who had watched him like a hawk, knew why.

"He does not suspect that she knows of my love," he reflected. "He purposed to make no reference to the matter, when I am—"

He stopped, with a thrill, at the ominous word.

He glanced at the woman. So cold, so unmoved, would she care which of them lay dead when the morning sun awakened all the world else to a new life.

Having thrown their coats aside, the Little Giant appeared in a dark-blue woolen shirt, Iron Despard in a white muslin one. This was a disadvantage to the latter, as, by reason of it, his body presented a more conspicuous mark against the dark background of the shadowed woods that surrounded the space illuminated by

the ball of fire which burned at the top of the pine tree.

And now, within the circle of those ghastly dead, they stood in position, holding their rapiers above their heads by hilt and point.

"Are you ready?"

"Ready!"

A graceful sweep, and the weapons clashed!

As they rested against each other with a slight vibrating movement, they emitted a hissing sound, like serpents. Ah! their sting was death!

Slowly, eye to eye, the contestants moved about each other, throwing their weight backward and forward, first on one foot, then on the other.

Suddenly Iron Despard's rapier described a lightning circle in the air to be caught with a ringing clash by that of his opponent.

Then came a series of rapid passes—*clang! clang! clang! clang!*

Then silence, save that ominous hissing sound.

Into the Little Giant's face had come a new expression. He had already discovered that Iron Despard was no novice.

Turn whichever way he might, he could always see, just beyond his adversary, the ghastly dead. Would he be added to their number to-night? Was that old crime to be thus expiated?

But, more than this, he would lose her! Confusion! was he to be defeated before her eyes?—after he had so proudly shown her his power among men!

That thought moved him anew. He set his teeth with deadly desperation. He would win her by assault, like some queen of the olden time!

Now he pressed the fighting, yet relaxing his vigilance not a whit. He knew that he could not afford to.

Iron Despard slowly yielded ground. But his eye should have told his opponent that now he was most dangerous.

Suddenly he slipped, or seemed to!

Joe Smedley saw—or thought he saw an opening in his guard, and made a fierce lunge at his heart.

A smile—a terrible smile—came to Iron Despard's lips!

While, with a flexure as sinuous as that of a serpent, his body evaded the eager point of his adversary's weapon, he caught the blade on his own, so that they glided by each other until the hilts struck. Then, with a wrench which no human grasp could withstand, he tore the sword from Joe Smedley's hand, and sent it flying through the air over his head. And, as the Little Giant lost his equilibrium, and fell upon one knee and hand, Iron Despard towered above him like an avenging fate, with his sword-point at his heart.

His face was ghastly pale. Into his eyes had suddenly come that terrible light which had won him the name of the Demon Duelist.

"This—this for your presumption—dog!" he hissed between his teeth, and would have plunged the weapon to the hilt into the breast of the man who had dared to declare his love for the woman Iron Despard had set apart from all others.

But at that moment there came a smothered, murmuring cry, a fluttering of skirts, and the Queen of the Green Cloth was upon her knees, with her arms about the neck of the fallen duelist, and her white face and her despairing, appealing, deprecating eyes turned toward the conqueror.

To Iron Despard the revelation came like a stroke of lightning. No need to recall a thousand and one incidents of the past week, at the time not understood. At a flash, he saw it all.

Yet he stared in dumb incredulity. Brushed his hand across his eyes, and stared again. Then a look of awful agony came into his face—a despair beyond words. As he shrunk back step by step, the man began to pant and tremble, until the quivering rapier dropped from his nerveless grasp.

Not taking his eyes off her face, he groped behind him with his hand, until the cold muzzle of his faithful steed was thrust affectionately into his palm, with a low whinny and caressing nuzzle.

Then, without a word, without a sound, he turned like a madman, bounded into the saddle, and spurred away into the night, never looking back.

The Queen of the Green Cloth fainted.

But the Little Giant had her in his arms, clasped close over the heart she had saved from the deadly rapier of the Demon Duelist.

"Mine! mine!" he shouted in a frenzy of delight, while he covered her white face with kisses. "Mine by her own confession! Ha! ha! ha! Now I defy all the powers of

Heaven or hell to snatch her from me! Mine!—mine!—mine!"

But as if conjured by this wild challenge, a being appeared before him seemingly sprung from earth or air. It was the phantom who had so nearly lured him over the precipice, who had responded to the spell of the Indian sorceress, who had risen from the flames of Iron Despard's burning saloon, each time warning him from his reckless pursuit of the woman whom he at last held on his heart. Now the phantom extended her arms to him, her eyes streaming tears, on her face an appeal of despairing love that must have moved any heart not steeled by selfish passion.

But Joe Smedley laughed in almost demoniac exultation, as he hugged closer the form of his unconscious prize, and shouted:

"Never! never! After all these years she is mine at last—the only woman I ever loved! I—"

But with a cry like that of an enraged tigress the phantom sprung forward and buried a poniard to the hilt in the upturned breast of the helpless Queen of the Green Cloth!

The Little Giant was paralyzed. He could not realize what had been done. From the first he had believed that the phantom which haunted him was a thing of impalpable air. But that was unquestionably an earthly weapon wielded by a carnal arm. He could but stare dumbly from the motionless woman in his arms to that other who stood before him, brandishing her blood-reeking knife above her head while she laughed the shrill, eerie cachinnation of a maniac.

He heard, as if far away, a cry of fear rage and pain, in a man's voice, and was dimly conscious of the sudden appearance of the Skeleton Band beyond the circle of the ghastly hanging dead, who had witnessed all this tragedy as unmoved as the trees and rocks.

But he saw something else which astonished him still more, excluding all else from his thoughts. He saw the phantom tear the flowing blonde locks from her head, and the close-cropped black ringlets of the ill-starred Hally stood revealed.

Then he knew it all.

Years ago, to rid himself of this woman of whose love he had tired, and leave himself free to woo and win Hortense Ashurst, now the Queen of the Green Cloth, he had employed a gang of pliant tools to put her out of the way, the world supposing that she had committed suicide.

Later, when he had won the new object of his desires, a misunderstanding during a temporary separation had led each to think the other false. Both had left the States and gone West—she to marry Iron Despard; he to meet a popular actress in San Francisco. Now he knew that this actress was his old love in disguise, who had escaped death somehow and won him over again.

He knew that she had preserved her flowing blonde tresses in the form of a wig, so that she was able to appear to him as a phantom of her old self but of the past, in the vain hope of awakening remorse for the dead, and so pity for the living. Her hand, too, had struck this terrible vengeance on all who had assisted in the great wrong he had done her. But him she had spared, clinging to him to the last.

Failing in all, she had at last struck her rival to the heart.

All this, which has required so many words to detail, came to Joe Smedley like a flash.

Then he saw the bloody knife descend again, this time cleaving the heart that had loved so long and so sadly, and Hally fell without a groan.

The next instant the Little Giant was surrounded by the Skeleton Avengers, and the Queen of the Green Cloth was snatched from his arms by their chief.

"She is dead! she is dead! Oh, Hortense, my sister!" he groaned.

It was Patent-leather Joe, whom Hally had helped to escape from prison; and, as repayment, he had assisted her in her revenge.

A word will explain all mysteries. The men had been given the appearance of luminous skeletons by drawing the appropriate bones with damp phosphorus on black tights. Their black hooded cloaks enabled them to disappear at pleasure by simply covering themselves up. The hoofs of their horses were muffled.

The skeleton with whom Iron Despard had clasped hands in the cave was a genuine one, strung on wires and manipulated after the manner of stage skeletons, while words were put into their mouths by a cunning ventriloquist.

Hally, being an actress, had personated the

Indian sorceress, changing her dress quickly behind the veil of smoke. Then, and on the verge of the cliff, the Little Giant had been knocked senseless from behind with that weapon which leaves no sign—a bag stuffed with sand in the form of a club.

The ascent of the face of the cliff from Iron Despard's burning saloon needs no explanation. The ball of fire was slid on a wire from the brow of a neighboring cliff to the top of the pine tree.

Some days later the Little Giant was found hanging by the wrists in the midst of his eleven confederates. The Queen of the Green Cloth and ill-starred Hally were buried in unknown graves. The Skeleton Avengers disappeared. To this day old citizens of Hell Hole tell how the camp was wiped out and twelve of its Vigilantes hanged in most horrible fashion by a band of vampires, one of whom, taking upon himself the shape of man, ran for one short week the crack lay-out of the place.

With his sore heart-burden, where on the face of the wide earth wanders the Demon Duelist? Who can tell?

THE END.

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